From Surviving to Thriving: Exploring the Experiences of LGBTQ+ Adolescents and Engaging Teacher Allies in Rural Montana Schools

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For my students.

You've taught me more than I could ever teach you.

Table of Contents

Introduction

"I feel like I'm in an abusive relationship with my job," I lamented to our school counselor during my prep period. Lying face down on the couch in her office, I felt defeated. "And the only reason I'm staying… is for the kids."

It was my eleventh year of teaching English at a rural Montana high school. Normally an energetic and enthusiastic educator, I suddenly dreaded going to work, and for the first time in my life I had a temper. Wrangling my anger felt like a fulltime job. On weekends, I was a zombie, a shell of myself who isolated and binge-watched Netflix. Seemingly out of nowhere, I was becoming one of those teachers I'd always pitied and criticized—weary teachers who went about their duties like joyless automatons, bitter teachers who took out their frustrations on innocent students. Fortunately, I could keep myself together during the school day. After all, my students weren't the problem; students rarely are. Over the school year, my classroom became a foxhole where I hunkered down in hopes of making it to May without getting targeted by an angry parent demanding the impossible, an out-of-touch community member ranting on Facebook, or an administrator who only watched his own back, not the backs of teachers.

In ten years, our school had gone through three superintendents and four principals—an educational reality not uncommon in rural America. On top of what seemed to be a constant transition period with new administrative policies, procedures, and protocols, a global pandemic flipped our profession upside down, and during the third school year of quarantines, mask mandates, contact tracing, online teaching, hybrid learning, scrubbing down desks with disinfectant between class periods, and living in constant fear of an invisible enemy, I became an exhausted, angry, and disillusioned version of myself. And I wasn't alone. Across the country, teachers were leaving their classrooms in droves, many throwing up their hands and breaking contractual agreements mid-year, never to return. Demands on educators were at an all-time

high, and during this chaos, teachers were told to proceed in a business-as-usual manner, remember our "why," and of course, take care of our mental health.

My poor mental health was one of many factors which led to my decision to apply for graduate school and resign from my job; however, one factor overshadowed all the others. In autumn of 2021, a small but vibrant LGBTQ+ community suddenly emerged in our student body. Until then, I never had a student who was "out" during high school. Of course, many students came out *after* graduating and moving away, but it wasn't until my eleventh year of teaching that our rural school had out-and-proud students roaming the hallways, speaking up in our classrooms, and challenging the community's deep-seated heteronormative beliefs and values. I was beyond proud of my students and wanted to do everything in my power to foster an environment which enabled them to safely exist as their most authentic selves—something I should have been doing all along. Admittedly, their presence in the building felt foreign, and it became clear that our faculty was ill-equipped to provide them with the support and resources they needed. With time, it also became clear that several people in positions of power preferred that our LGBTQ+ students simply return to the shadowy margins of our rural community, a lonely place where they'd existed in exile their entire lives.

Early in the school year, meetings were held to discuss our queer students' names and pronouns. Rather than honoring their unique identities, teachers were told to continue using the pronouns which were assigned to them at birth. In addition, teachers were also required to call any transgender or nonbinary students by their "dead names"—a term which refers to the use of a person's given name in lieu of their chosen name. Along with denying our queer students the common courtesy of using their preferred names and pronouns, my students were also denied the right to form a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), an often lifesaving resource whose goal is to build

community, provide support, and create networking opportunities for LGBTQ+ students and their allies.

Several teachers, me included, refused to adhere to the administration's request to dead name our students. I didn't make this decision to disrespect my superiors but rather to respect my *students* whose identities were reduced to a whimsical trend. And yet I didn't want to get reprimanded, so I quietly honored their identities in my classroom. It was our secret—a way for me to respect them despite demands to dismiss them. Along with calling my students by their chosen names, I also included a section for preferred pronouns on the identification forms I had them fill out each semester. In addition, I strengthened the language in my syllabus about respecting everyone's gender and sexuality. Finally, I created and distributed Pride posters with a watercolor rainbow and the words "I see you" printed below it.

Yet all my efforts felt futile. Without a team of rural professionals with a shared goal—to support our struggling queer students—my advocacy attempts seemed worthless. After months of administrative opposition and disrespect, my queer students were angry and bitter, and their morale was dangerously low. We had that in common.

Despite being a straight cisgender woman who never had to defend my gender or sexuality, I could empathize with their struggles and tried my best to support them. As a Prius-driving English teacher who taught drama, requested that her students recycle, and kept her maiden name when she got married, I'd always had a small target on my back. Yet my queer students' targets were much, *much* bigger. My rural sense of belonging (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022b) was tenuous at best, but their rural sense of belonging was nonexistent. Our LGBTQ+ students were barely surviving when our school should have been giving them tools to *thrive*.

After I tearfully told my students that I would not be returning the following school year, I peeped my head out of my foxhole—and got hit. During tech week of my school play, I sent an email to the faculty with a list of students who would be absent for Friday's dress rehearsal. In this correspondence, I absentmindedly forgot to use two queer actors' dead names—the names listed in our system. Within minutes of clicking "send," an administrator appeared at my classroom door, visibly furious—and he tore me to shreds in front of my first period class.

"You need to use students' *real* names," he shouted. "How is the faculty supposed to know who is going to be absent if you use *nicknames*?"

Dumbfounded, I simply stared at him. That was all I could do. I was being publicly reprimanded for respecting my students, for honoring their identities, and acknowledging their existence. In what reality were my actions wrong?

After he stomped back to his office, I turned to my wide-eyed students, all witnesses to my public scolding. The silence in my classroom was palpable until one student broke it, attempting to make light of the uncomfortable situation.

"What are they gonna do, Ms. M? Fire you?"

With tears in my eyes, I gave my class a soft smile. My goodness, how I would miss seeing their faces every day.

Yeah, what are *they going to do?*

If our administrators weren't going to acknowledge my LGBTQ+ students' existence and if the district wasn't going to let them have a GSA, then I would find someone to facilitate the club for them. The GSA would be my parting gift. Fueled by absolute spite, I contacted a local nonprofit, an organization that had given presentations about healthy relationships and consent at our school in the past. I'd overheard something about their employees managing neighboring

schools' GSAs, so I set up a time for one of their counselors to meet with my students. Within a week, a bubbly woman was sitting in my classroom discussing GSA logistics with a handful of nervous teenagers. Their quiet pleas for support were finally being answered.

"We could file a lawsuit," she told them. "The refusal to let you have a GSA is a clear violation of Title IX—but legal stuff can get ugly. I'd rather utilize our time together to get this GSA off the ground."

My students nodded in agreement, and suddenly we all felt a little more hopeful than before.

The group decided to meet after school—off campus—each Wednesday afternoon. I called the local librarian, a woman I knew was an ally, and secured a conference room as their meeting place. I'd gone behind my administrators' backs to ensure my queer students knew *someone* cared, and yet my efforts still didn't feel like enough. And now… I was leaving them.

Yet, leaving the rural community I once called home allowed me to immerse myself in graduate coursework. Higher education not only became my professional healing journey, but it also gave me the opportunity to pursue this qualitative research study which explores two important questions:

(1) What are the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents residing in rural Montana?

(2) How can rural educators become LGBTQ+ allies in their schools and communities?

Literature Review

The studies cited in this literature review analyze the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents who reside in the rural Southeast, Midwest, and Pacific Northwest United States. The selected researchers' data predominantly adheres to rural deficit narratives (i.e. what rural places lack), queer hardship (academic, mental health, interpersonal relationships, etc.), and high rates of LGBTQ+ school victimization (De Pedro et al., 2018). In fact, most studies which examine rural-living LGBTQ+ youth highlight various factors which inevitably make queer lives more difficult; however, it is important that researchers also explore what rural communities do *well*—and have the capacity to change.

Regarding positive social change, this literature review also examines opportunities for LGBTQ+ allyship and advocacy in rural America. It discusses how rural school cultures can adversely affect queer students, the difficulties educators often face when engaging in ally work in their classrooms and communities, and ultimately, why rural advocacy work is essential to the overall health and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth.

LGBTQ+ Youth in Rural Communities

Rural places are generally viewed as "rife with conservative religions and political views inconsistent with LGBTQ+ affirmation and support" (Roberts et al., 2023, p. 1). Additionally, rural community members who possess conservative and religious values tend to view gender and sexuality through "heteronormative, rigid binary" (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 4) lenses which inherently marginalize LGBTQ+ people. Because these lenses also perpetuate damaging and dangerous cultural norms (Wike et al., 2022), rural-living LGBTQ+ youth experience higher rates of family and peer victimization, often in the form of "harassment, exclusion, and assault" (De Pedro et al., 2018, p. 266). In addition to tension with family and community members,

rural-living queer adolescents also experience increased instances of sexual harassment and higher rates of dating violence in their romantic relationships (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019).

LGBTQ+ youth also have difficulty accessing basic resources like social services, community centers, and healthcare facilities which are typically established in more populated areas (De Pedro et al., 2018). The lack of amenities and support creates a "sense of isolation" (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 8) and marginalization for LGBTQ+ adolescents in rural America. This sense of isolation results in high rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Hall et al., 2018) among queer youth. Furthermore, rural areas have higher levels of poverty and thus higher rates of homelessness among queer youth (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019). Given the myriad hardships among rural-living LGBTQ+ teenagers, they often struggle with mental health issues, battle low self-esteem, and frequently turn to drugs and alcohol to cope. In fact, substance abuse is "rampant" (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 7) among LGBTQ+ adolescents residing in rural America.

Rural communities often perpetuate "physically and psychologically harmful experiences" (Roberts et al., 2023, p. 2) for queer youth; however, there is a significant gap in our understanding of LGBTQ+ adolescents' lived experiences within their families, schools, and rural communities (De Pedro et al., 2018). By adhering to "dominant deficit narratives" (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022b) which paint rural places as "backwoods and backwater, unintelligent, and adverse to difference and change" (Parton, 2022, p. 76), we read a mere chapter of an incredibly complex story. Common discourse regarding rural communities tends to highlight LGBTQ+ hardships and the hostility directed at them (Rand & Paceley, 2022), but research must "move beyond [LGBTQ+] victimization" (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 9) and strive to recognize queer well-being, strengths, and assets within the rural context.

Despite hardship, trauma, and negative experiences, LGBTQ+ adolescents' attachment to rural communities is strong, so when applying strategies to support and advocate for queer youth, "the positive aspects of rural and small-town communities should not be overlooked" (Wikes et al., 2022, p. 19009). Future research must "holistically" (Rand & Paceley, 2022, p. 23) seek to understand the rural communities where queer youth reside—and often thrive with LGBTQ+-affirming resources and support.

Rural School Cultures

Compared to queer students living in more populated areas, rural LGBTQ+ students are more likely to experience "hostile school climates" (Roberts et al., 2023, p. 3) in which they hear more homophobic discourse and endure increased rates of victimization. Peer harassment takes many forms including verbal teasing, use of homophobic language, microaggressions, and physical assault (De Pedro et al., 2018). In addition, rural-living LGBTQ+ youth endure more "discursive violence" which consists of degrading "words, tones, gestures, and images" (Roberts et al., 2023, p. 16), all negatively depicting LGBTQ+ people. And their rural peers are not the only perpetrators; many rural educators possess negative views of LGBTQ+ people and are at fault for harassment, most often in the form of homophobic remarks (Hall et al., 2018; De Pedro et al., 2018).

School victimization has an adverse impact on queer youth's academic achievement and social emotional health (De Pedro et al., 2018; Blackburn & Thomas, 2019). For example, compared to their straight peers, rural-living queer youth have lower GPAs and demonstrate decreased success in school due to frequent absences, discipline issues, and mental health matters (Whitney et al., 2022). LGBTQ+ youth living in rural America are also less likely to pursue higher education after graduating from high school (De Pedro et al., 2018). Not only does

school victimization affect queer students academically, but LGBTQ+ adolescents' social-emotional health is also jeopardized, resulting in issues with their behavioral health and emotional well-being (Roberts et al., 2023). For instance, queer youth living in rural areas often engage in unsafe sexual behavior, abuse drugs and alcohol, practice self-harm, and have increased rates of suicide (De Pedro et al., 2018).

Rural schools that have anti-bullying policies tend to "play a powerful role in reducing LGBTQ+ harassment" (De Pedro et al., 2018, p. 268), yet anti-bullying policies must be accepted as a part of a school's culture. Implementation, application, and acceptance of "comprehensive anti-bullying policies that explicitly protect sexual orientation and gender identity or expression" (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 8) are of utmost importance in rural school districts. Rural schools must also channel their energy to "[disrupt] heteronormative and transphobic belief systems" (Whitney et al., 2022, p. 2104) which perpetuate hostility and violence toward LGBTQ+ youth. One simple way to dismantle damaging belief systems is by honoring transgender and nonbinary students' chosen names and preferred pronouns which illustrates to all students that gender is not binary but instead, complex and worthy of discussion and analysis. When rural schools move beyond anti-bullying policies and "toward expansive understandings about gender and sexuality" (Whitney et al., 2022, p. 2107), they create safer, more inclusive educational spaces for queer students.

Along with experiencing harassment and hostility in rural schools, another queer issue is a lack of representation in the classroom. LGBTQ+ students rarely see themselves reflected in secondary curricula because rural districts are prone to "suppress discussion or expression of LGBTQ+ topics, making educational spaces oppressive and even dangerous" (Shelton, 2022, p. 180) for queer students. In fact, in a national survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight

Education Network (GLSEN), only 11% of rural LGBTQ+ students reported experiencing a curriculum which included information about LGBTQ+ people, history, or events (Kosciw et al., 2016). Because public schools were created to "provide a solid foundation for students' future endeavors…college should not be the first time [queer] youth feel included and validated" (Roberts et al., 2023, p. 26) in academia. Authentic representation of queer "figures, characters, storylines, and history" is important because it improves the overall well-being of rural-living LGBTQ+ youth (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 8)—and reinforces that they are not alone.

Rural school cultures vary from district to district, so it is unfair to assume that all rural schools are unsupportive of LGBTQ+ youth. We should never '[paint] all rural places with a broad brush…where racism and anti-LGBTQ sentiment are accepted parts of daily life" (Azano et al., 2020, p. 41). Many rural schools make great efforts to support their queer students; however, many are complacent in their suffering (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019). Rural LGBTQ+ oppression manifests in many ways: the attitudes and behaviors of the school community, relationships and interactions between the school community, district programs and policies, and even the physical environment of the building (Hall et al., 2018). Furthermore, rural school climates may implicitly or explicitly "reinforce heteronormativity, traditional or rigid gender roles, and patriarchy" (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 5) which are damaging to everyone in the building—not just queer students.

Despite existing research's emphasis on victimization, mental health issues, and negative school experiences among LGBTQ+ youth, "Most teachers and administrators across the research [express] a willingness to gain further training and education to support [queer] students" (Blackburn & Thomas, 2018, p. 10). This training and support may look like endorsing LGBTQ+-affirmative policies and programs in rural schools, educating others about queer issues

and events, advocating for and alongside LGBTQ+ students, confronting heterosexism and homophobia in others, being mindful of one's privilege and internalized biases, providing social support for the LGBTQ+ community, and increasing one's understanding about queer issues (Hall et al., 2018)—all of which foster queer students' rural sense of belonging (RSOB) (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022b).

A Rural Sense of Belonging

There are many benefits to rural life, but there is danger in romanticizing small communities and assuming all residents "automatically feel a sense of belonging where they live" (Comber, 2016, p. 36). LGBTQ+ youth often feel marginalized from the dominant population and are frequently "ignored, pushed aside, or seen as inferior" (Azano et al., 2020, p. 19) in their rural communities and schools; however, fostering queer adolescents' rural sense of belonging (RSOB) is one way to ensure they "build meaningful affiliations, stewardship, and active citizenship within that place" (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022b, p. 199).

To help queer youth achieve a RSOB, rural schools and communities must understand these adolescents' personal values, interests, and goals (Strayhorn, 2018). When LGBTQ+ teenagers have a strong RSOB, their lived experiences become less about "resilience and survival" and more about their value, acceptance, and purpose (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022a, p. 1) in rural places. A strong sense of belonging is associated with increased psychological and social functioning (Hagerty et. al, 2002), and by fostering LGBTQ+ adolescents' RSOB, rural schools and communities encourage them to explore their relationship with place (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022b). Ultimately, a strong RSOB can help queer youth establish purpose and pride in rural America which is too often viewed as inhospitable and unwelcoming to LGBTQ+ people.

Fostering a sense of belonging often comes more naturally in rural places because they are small, "more insulated," and "communally aware" when compared urban or suburban places In addition, rural places tend to prioritize and invest in children's safety and well-being (Shelton, 2022, p. 179). Moreover, rural communities are often viewed as "intimate" places and provide LGBTQ+ adolescents with opportunities to "effect change and challenge homophobia" (Roberts et al., 2023, p. 4). When queer youth possess a strong RSOB, they often build networks of support, advocate for change in their schools and communities, and "survive and thrive with pride" (Wike et al., 2022, p. 19010). Although they often experience greater adversity than their urban or suburban peers (De Pedro et al., 2018), rural LGBTQ+ adolescents "possess many strengths and are resilient in the face of challenges" (Wike et al., 2022, p. 18990). These challenges often encourage queer teenagers to forge "pathways to positive development in different, but not inferior, ways to urban LGBTQ+ youth" (Rand & Paceley, 2022, p. 22).

Ultimately, rural places should not be viewed solely as "sites of struggle and challenge" for LGBTQ+ adolescents (Shelton, 2022, p. 181). It is important to remember that "rural communities are not just hostile or just supportive, but a nuanced and complex combination of both" (Rand & Paceley, 2022, p. 36). Many queer populations in rural America are vibrant and active in their local schools and communities (Shelton, 2022) and possess a strong RSOB. By adhering to deficit narratives (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022b), rural places can seem bereft of resources and support when compared to urban or suburban places; however, rural communities' tight-knit relationships and strong local connections can provide LGBTQ+ youth with opportunities for empowerment and change—and this work often begins in rural schools (Shelton, 2022).

Teacher Allies in Rural Schools

Educators are critical to queer students' well-being and success (Shelton, 2022), and many teachers engage in ally work to support LGBTQ+ students and foster their RSOB. Teacher allies are generally members of a dominant group and strive to end oppression by working with and for "socially disadvantaged people" (Hall et al., 2018, p. 59). Ally work is "deeply contextualized" (Shelton, 2022, p. 178) depending on the community, and the nuances of place often dictate teachers' ability to engage in advocacy endeavors.

Perhaps the most socially accepted way rural educators can support LGBTQ+ students and foster their RSOB is by establishing and advising a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in their school district (Roberts et al., 2023). GSAs "allow for both socialization among and activism by LGBTQ+ youth and their allies" (Hall et al., 2018, p. 51-52). Rural schools are only half as likely to have a GSA than urban or suburban schools, but due to GSAs often being the sole LGBTQ+ resource in rural communities, rural students more frequently attend GSA meetings compared to students in larger districts (Kosciw et al., 2016). Gay-Straight Alliances increase queer students' feelings of safety in rural schools because LGBTQ+ students experience less hostility, hear less homophobic rhetoric, and experience a "greater sense of connectedness" in schools which have this often lifesaving resource (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 9). Overall, GSAs promote the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ students; however, due to various factors, many teachers are hesitant to advise this club.

Despite protections from Title IX and the Equal Access Act of 1984 (*U.S. Department of Education*, 2021; GLSEN, 2024), LGBTQ+ advocacy efforts often feel unsettling in rural places because "LGBTQ+ teacher ally work is complicated and sometimes prohibited in rural

schooling" (Shelton, 2022, p. 191). In fact, some rural districts are anti-GSA (Roberts et al., 2023). For example, one rural school eliminated *all* student clubs "in order to subvert a court order to allow a GSA in their high school" (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 5). Administrative moves like this determine a school's culture and dictate how, where, and to what degree educators can engage in ally work. It has become more common to have openly nonbinary, transgender, or gender fluid students in rural classrooms; however, "navigating this terrain" (Azano et al., 2020, p. 207) with parents and administrators can be difficult and unnerving depending on the culture a rural school creates for its students—and its teachers.

Despite the opposition which too often accompanies ally work, most rural educators want to be allies and ensure that every student feels loved and supported in their classrooms; however, teacher allies sometimes "feel unsupported by their administrators" (Whitney et al., 2022, p. 2116). Unlike their urban and suburban counterparts, rural educators often think they might get "in trouble" (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 5) with their principals and students' parents—fearing professional reprimands, damaged reputations, summons from the school board or superintendent, and getting fired. Rural educators frequently express "discomfort" and "anxiety" (Whitney et al., 2022, p. 2107) when engaging in LGBTQ+ ally work—and their fears are legitimate; many who "ignored policy in order to accommodate students' wishes [regarding names and pronouns] put themselves in jeopardy" (Rand & Paceley, 2022, p. 28) both socially and professionally.

Not only do rural educators fear getting punished for engaging in ally work, but many also feel ill-equipped to support queer students. Rural educators "consistently describe uncertainty and lack of preparedness in engaging in LGBTQ+ topics" (Shelton, 2022, p.181) due to limited professional development opportunities, sociocultural factors, and anti-LGBTQ+

sentiments within their communities. More reasons rural educators feel trepidation about ally work include a lack of understanding about gender fluidity, a subconscious upholding of the gender binary, fear of parental resistance, and a high likelihood of community backlash. Despite the risks, many teachers safely engage in LGBTQ+ advocacy work and positively effect change in rural schools (Whitney et al., 2022). The ideal goal of allyship is for rural educators "to create a welcoming and supportive culture for LGBTQ+ youth" (Roberts et al., 2023, p. 24); however, this is the ideal goal. When teachers themselves lack support or do not have the necessary resources to engage in ally work, queer students remain marginalized and disadvantaged.

To make rural schools safe and supportive for LGBTQ+ students, faculty and staff must educate themselves regarding the expansive nature of gender and sexuality which could lead to increased empathy and acceptance. Rural educators should "invite discomfort in, and grapple with it… this will be challenging, and conflicts may arise" (Whitney et al., 2022, p. 2123). These conflicts often manifest among the adults in the building, and unfortunately "it is the students who suffer" (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 10). Teachers, administrators, counselors, school resource officers, secretaries, aides, bus drivers, cafeteria staff, and anyone else who is employed by a rural district must educate themselves and work together to create school environments that not only feel safe and inclusive, but equitable for queer students. Ultimately, it is adults' responsibility to seek and undergo training on LGBTQ+ issues—to "support the whole child, and prepare them for diverse worlds… the whole of these individuals cannot be lost in the political bureaucracy of [rural] schooling" (Roberts et al., 2023, p. 25).

Teacher ally work is "not about always knowing precisely what to do or being comfortable doing it" (Shelton, 2022, p. 192), but as rural educators, we should strive to do it anyway. Every educator has the power to make their school more inclusive for LGBTQ+

students (GLSEN, 2024). And rather than viewing rural America through a deficit lens, teachers must “consider how rural contexts might be advantageous, rather than limiting, to LGBTQ+ teacher ally work” (Shelton, 2022, p. 182). This notion invites educators to explore ways to merge community and curriculum, ultimately creating opportunities for LGBTQ+ students to both celebrate and critique (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021) their rural homes—and advocate for social change within them.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Rural English Pedagogy (CREP) is used as the theoretical framework for my research study. Theorists Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen (2021) believe that "there is a profound need to create opportunities within rural communities to critically examine and discuss LGBTQIA+ issues, and we imagine a Critical Rural English Pedagogy as one way to do this" (p. 95). As a place-based pedagogy, CREP explores ways rural English educators can constructively merge their curricula and communities. CREP's dominant goal is to critically examine rural spaces—celebrating what rural communities do well while simultaneously identifying what must change. Employing CREP in the classroom is a way to examine local social justice issues, explore advocacy opportunities, and enact positive change in rural places.

Critical Rural English Pedagogy (CREP)

Critical Rural English Pedagogy "[analyzes] how rural places and communities construct reputations and identities, particularly as they intersect with gender and race" (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 119). Based on the underlying theory that rurality is a social construct, English educators can view CREP as a set of pedagogies whose objective is to examine power dynamics, inherent ideologies, representation issues, and opportunities for social activism in rural settings. CREP's main goals are to celebrate and critique the rural settings in which students live and provide a way for English educators to embrace rural complexities in their classrooms (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021). For instance, the intersection between rurality and queerness. As such, CREP exists as a relevant and beneficial theoretical framework for my research study.

My purpose is to explore LGBTQ+ students' lived experiences in a rural context: in their communities, within their families, among their peers, and in our classrooms—ultimately

inspecting how rurality plays a role in shaping queer identities and students' rural sense of belonging (RSOB) (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022b). Undoubtedly, unjust power dynamics, issues of representation, and ingrained perceptions of what it means to be "rural" exist in rural America, all of which can be damaging to queer adolescents; however, CREP is a way for educators to activate students' civic duty, sense of purpose, and RSOB through a critical analysis of their rural homes.

Ultimately, ELA educators can help LGBTQ+ students critically analyze the perceived positive and negative aspects of their communities—and explore ways to enact social change within them. Additionally, my study investigates tactics English educators can use to become adult allies with CREP as a foundation of the rural classroom: Yielding actionable change for educators as well as for LGBTQ+ youth.

CREP in the Classroom

Studies which use Critical Rural English Pedagogy theory are few due to its recent establishment in the field of education; however, CREP falls under the more widely practiced Place-Based Education. CREP builds upon place-based pedagogies and invites students to analyze the complexity of their rural lives (Boyd & Darragh, 2022). Teacher researchers who have implemented CREP in their research endeavors believe the theory encourages students to "think critically about what it means to be rural, who qualifies as rural, and what power dynamics exist between rural and sub/urban places" (Parton, 2022, p. 76). Essentially, CREP allows English educators to focus openly on the theme of rurality, not only illustrating that rural lives are worthy of analysis but that students have the right to critique and celebrate their communities through a unique lens of their *own*—not a lens (often heteronormative) which has been constructed for them.

In implementing CREP, “teachers and students alike can begin to tell a new tale of what it means to be rural and help stop, and perhaps even reverse, the ‘slow violence’ currently being hoisted upon rural people and places” (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 8). This slow violence affects rural people in many ways, but it is often disproportionately directed at the community’s most vulnerable residents—those who are afraid to be their authentic selves, those who lack a RSOB—residents who are merely surviving instead of thriving in rural places. Slow violence is insidious and may take the form of deep-seated heteronormative traditions, religious beliefs which often persecute queer people, or conservative politics and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation which threaten queer people’s basic human rights. CREP is a way to combat these damaging traditions, beliefs, and ideologies within our rural classrooms to create more inclusive, equitable spaces for queer adolescents.

English educators must critically examine (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021) and discuss LGBTQ+ issues in their classrooms; in doing so, they can create educational environments which welcome marginalized students and provide them with a greater sense of agency and belonging in rural schools and communities.

Methods

Existing research which examines LGBTQ+ youth in rural America is scarce, especially in the Mountain West. My single case study (Gustafsson, 2017; Wells, 2004; Yin, 2009) examines queer adolescents' lived experiences—experiences often fraught with hardship and hostility—in rural Montana. Since case studies afford qualitative researchers a flexible, yet intensive, examination of a person or group of people (Gustafsson, 2017), I selected this method to depict a unique illustration of place and the intersection of queerness and rurality.

Case studies tell stories which generate rich background material and add to existing research which examines common problems with no easy, concrete answers (Gustafsson, 2017). Given the nuanced nature of rural life across geographical contexts, the "solutions" presented in my case study may not apply everywhere; however, the data adds to our growing understanding of queer adolescents' lived experiences in rural America and offers educators ways to become LGBTQ+ allies in their rural schools and communities.

Ultimately, the purpose of this single case study (Gustafsson, 2017) is to tell my participants' collective story—a story about resilience and empathy in the face of adversity in rural Montana—a story about how educators can reimagine their classrooms as more inclusive, equitable spaces that foster queer students' rural sense of belonging (RSOB) (Wynhoff Olsen, et al., 2022b) and give them a greater sense of purpose—and pride—in place.

Participant Information

Five people participated in this study. Participant eligibility was determined by two factors: (1) participants identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community; (2) participants were currently (or formerly) enrolled in a rural (class B or C)[1] Montana high school. Participants who

[1] As of 2023, Montana's Class B schools enroll 101-300 students, and Class C schools enroll 1-100 students.

formerly attended a class B or C Montana high school were required to have been enrolled within the past decade. Table 1 displays participant demographics including pseudonyms, ages, preferred pronouns, and academic statuses (at the time of their interviews).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Pronouns	Academic Status
Maggie	twenty-one	she/her	Undergraduate
Cedric	twenty	they/them	Undergraduate
Oliver	eighteen	he/him	High School Graduate
Ivy	seventeen	she/they	High School Student
Quinn	sixteen	he/him	High School Student

Participant Recruitment

I recruited Oliver, Ivy, and Quinn from my partnership with the local nonprofit organization which facilitated their Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). Each Wednesday afternoon, the participants' GSA adviser met them at the local library, and members communicated about meetings and events via a group chat on social media. I was invited to join their group chat and used this online venue to advertise my research study during the summer of 2023.

Recruiting tactics to find former LGBTQ+ students of class B and C Montana schools included the distribution of an Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved flyer on social media and word-of-mouth advertising. Cedric responded to the online flyer, interviewed, and then contacted Maggie about participating in the study. Both Cedric and Maggie were enrolled in out-of-state universities at the time of their interviews.

All five participants attended the same Montana high school. Originally, I planned to interview rural students from across the state of Montana, but this task proved more difficult than

anticipated. One factor that contributed to the challenging nature of my recruitment process was a hate crime which occurred at Montana State University-Bozeman in February of 2023. Immediately after IRB approved my study, a threatening email was sent to MSU's GSA, an act that instilled fear in the university's LGBTQ+ community. The institutional lack of response to this attack then sparked outrage among MSU's queer students and their allies. Out of respect, I halted the recruitment process and waited until summertime to contact MSU's GSA about recruiting potential participants.

In June of 2023, I emailed MSU's GSA with the goal of recruiting participants but received no response. Then I asked a fellow classmate (an active member of MSU's GSA) if they would share recruitment flyers and spread the word about my research study. This promising contact was enthusiastic and agreed to help, but no one from MSU's GSA contacted me.

Those who *were* willing to talk with me are the five participants whose voices are highlighted in this study, and I am forever grateful for their bravery in sharing their stories.

Researcher Positionality

It is important to disclose that all five participants are/were enrolled as students at my former place of work, a high school where I taught English/Language Arts for eleven years. Cedric, Maggie, and Oliver had taken several of my classes. Ivy and Quinn were never students under my direct instruction, but Ivy participated in an extracurricular which I advised, and I became acquainted with Quinn due to his involvement in the GSA.

Because of my close relationship with several participants, issues of objectivity arise—issues which could potentially impact my data analysis process and findings. When a researcher is personally invested in a study, it is imperative to safeguard against researcher bias—or risk

readers dismissing the data because they suspect the researcher has a personal agenda (Chapman, 2014). Although no researcher is without bias, my unique position as this study's sole researcher was at the forefront of my mind while developing interview questions[2], conducting interviews, and coding data (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Thereby, my professional paper committee reviewed my work and was in close contact with me during the analysis process.

I acknowledge my study's weaknesses and potential biases, but I also acknowledge that my relationship with participants could have influenced the candid nature of their responses as well as their willingness to share such personal stories and experiences. If that is an accurate assumption, I am grateful for my unique position as this study's sole researcher; it might have encouraged my participants to be more honest and authentic, ultimately adding rich background material (Gustafsson, 2017) to this field of study.

Data Collection

Case studies are in-depth research endeavors conducted over a sustained period of time (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). My study involves five participants who were interviewed between July of 2023 and February of 2024. Prior to interviews, I encouraged each participant to find a comfortable, quiet space to talk with me. We deliberately scheduled interviews on days (and during times) participants would not be disturbed by family members, work schedules, or school obligations. I began each interview by guiding the participant through the consent process, explaining the interview format, and disclosing how long the interview would take; on average, interviews lasted ninety minutes. Furthermore, interviews used a semi-structured format, and questions were open-ended in nature (Peoples, 2021) which encouraged participants

[2] See Appendix for a full list of interview questions.

to elaborate on their experiences. All interviews were conducted over Webex video calls and recorded for transcription purposes. All files were stored on a password-protected computer.

Interview questions were broken into four segments (See Appendix A). The first segment asked participants for basic information such as their age, preferred pronouns, and how long they'd lived in their rural community. The second segment asked personal questions including participants' hobbies and aspirations, the discovery and/or evolution of their gender identities, and their relationships with family members and friends. The third segment focused on the rural community where participants were raised and/or lived. After describing their community, participants also discussed their perception of rurality and how this social construct (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021) had positively and/or negatively shaped their queer identities. In addition, participants were asked questions about the community's resources and amenities for LGBTQ+ people as well as their rural sense of belonging (RSOB) (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022b) in the community. The fourth segment focused on participants' rural Montana high school. These questions inquired about their high school's culture, their positive and negative experiences with peers and teachers, LGBTQ+ representation in the classroom and/or curriculum, and ways participants thought rural educators could better accommodate and support queer students.

Data Analysis

I took several deliberate steps to analyze and code the data: (1) Transcribe interview; (2) Read transcript to uncover any apparent themes; (3) Watch interview video and take notes on participants' tone of voice, gestures, mannerisms, and body language; (4) Reread transcript and annotations to uncover less apparent themes; (5) Color-code themes and create tables which thematically display the data.

1. After conducting the interview, I watched the video recording and created a transcript. I then arranged the interview transcription with the following headings: *Basic Information*, *Personal Information*, *Rural Community Information*, and *Rural School Information.* I also included time stamps at each of the segment breaks to get an idea for how long participants spent talking during each interview phase (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Rather than having a program or app transcribe interviews, I transcribed them myself with the goal of fully immersing myself in the data and reliving the interview experience (Peoples, 2021). Ten minutes of video took approximately an hour to transcribe thoroughly and accurately, so each transcription took eight to nine hours to complete. I also eradicated any filler words or phrases to make participant responses more concise and coherent (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018).
2. After each interview was transcribed, I read through it and annotated any patterns across the five participants' responses to uncover themes in the data (Cresswell, 2013). I searched for recurring words and phrases (e.g. all participants wished rural residents would be more "open-minded" regarding LGBTQ+ people). After annotating each interview transcription, I uncovered twelve relatively superficial themes which were coded and displayed in a table along with participant quotations illustrating each theme (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). For example, all five participants considered themselves to be artistic, so I coded this theme "ART." Their interests in painting and sketching, playing music and writing lyrics, theater and drama, animation, photography, and clothing- and jewelry-making were hobbies which helped define their identities. In the "ART" table, I compiled a selection of participant quotations which illustrated their collective interest in creative expression. Although step 2

was a productive start to analyze and code the data, I was not satisfied with the somewhat superficial nature of the twelve themes I uncovered—which led me to step 3.

3. I rewatched each interview, not with the intent to transcribe but to *observe*; however, I did fix any errors found in the original transcription. This time I paid close attention to participants' tones of voice, gestures, mannerisms, as well as their body language (Peoples, 2021). I took notes in the transcription's margins, identifying points at which participants laughed, sounded sad or sarcastic, or displayed a nervous gesture. At the beginning of each interview, participants were visibly nervous: shifting in their seats, giggling uncomfortably, or gesturing in a manner which illustrated discomfort. As interviews progressed, however, participants visibly became more comfortable, and their demeanors changed: laughter was more genuine, repetitive and/or nervous behaviors were minimized, and they spoke with more confidence and vulnerability. Since 65% to 70% of communication is conveyed through nonverbal cues (Peoples, 2021), observing participants' body language was crucial. For example, Cedric repeatedly pulled at their shirt which I observed as an unconscious gesture to hide their stereotypically feminine chest. Participants' tones of voice were also revealing. For example, Maggie was often sarcastic in tone, and after identifying her sharp wit, her responses conveyed an entirely different meaning. In addition, while discussing other disadvantaged people, participants often spoke loudly and with more conviction, got flustered as they passionately discussed social injustices, and displayed an array of emotions (from sadness to outrage) at the inequities occurring in their community. Ultimately, step 3 was vital in depicting themes which were less apparent on the first read-through.
4. Once again, I reread each transcript and paid close attention to the notes I had taken in step 3. After identifying participants' tones of voice, gestures, mannerisms, and body language when

asked specific questions, I uncovered seven themes (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Some themes became more sophisticated versions of a superficial theme I initially discovered in step 2. For example, the theme "Sense of Social Justice" evolved into "Heightened Sense of Empathy & Advocacy." There were several other themes I had not originally depicted during step 2 which emerged only when analyzing participants' tones of voice, gestures, mannerisms, and body language. For example, I had little understanding of the participants' resounding sense of resiliency upon my first read-through; however, upon combing through the data again, the theme of "Resilience & Western Toughness" became an incredibly prominent and important component of the study's findings.

5. The last step in the data analysis process was color-coding each of the themes: (A) Outsider Status: Lacking a Rural Sense of Belonging = red; (B) Conflicting Familial Support = pink; (C) School Victimization & Subsequent Anxiety = orange; (D) Catching a "Vibe" about Teacher Allies = purple; (E) Lack of LGBTQ+ Representation in School = yellow; (F) Resilience & Western Toughness = blue; (G) Heightened Sense of Empathy & Advocacy = green. After attributing a color to each research theme, I read through the interview transcriptions for the final time and highlighted noteworthy passages which depicted each theme. Participant quotations were then copied and pasted into a thematically organized table.

Table 2 details the seven themes, color-coded and listed in the lefthand column. The middle column provides a description of each theme, and the righthand column presents a participant quotation which serves as an example.

Table 2

Data Themes, Descriptions, and Example Quotations

Theme	Description	Quotation
Outsider Status: Lacking a Rural Sense of Belonging	Participants reported feeling like "outsiders" in their communities, and due to negative stereotypes associated with rurality, were hesitant to label themselves as rural people. Their sense of marginalization or "otherness" illustrated that they possessed little to no rural sense of belonging.	Ivy: "I still feel like I'm not a part of this [community]… I do feel like an outsider."
Conflicting Familial Support	Though all participants reported having at least one supportive family member, they also discussed varying levels of support from other family members including parents, siblings, and grandparents which often created tension in their homes.	Maggie: "I have a better time talking to my mom than my dad. I don't think I've actually sat down and talked to him face-to-face about [being queer] because he terrifies me a little bit."
School Victimization & Subsequent Anxiety	Participants endured peer harassment and hostility (predominantly in the form of microaggressions and discursive violence) which evoked their feelings of fear and anxiety while in school.	Oliver: "There was one math class that I absolutely could not go to because [of peer harassment]... eventually the teacher was like 'Do you want to drop out of this class?' and I was like 'Yes' because it was horrible."
Catching a "Vibe" about Teacher Allies	Participants reported feeling a "vibe" from certain teachers who they thought would be supportive of LGBTQ+ students. In most cases, participants had to make educated guesses about teacher allyship because it was not apparent or obvious to them.	Cedric: "I never had [a teacher] that I felt unsafe with, but definitely [my English and History teachers] were the ones that felt a lot more accepting."
Lack of LGBTQ+ Representation in School	Participants reported little to no LGBTQ+ representation (e.g. queer figures, characters, storylines, issues, etc.) in lessons, assignments, or activities at their rural school.	Quinn: "There really hasn't been a whole lot [of representation]. And actually, when it comes down to it, I don't really think there has been any."
Resilience & Western Toughness	Participants possessed high levels of strength and resilience in the face of adversity; however, they often minimized or negated their negative experiences with tough bravados, fierce independence, and isolating behaviors.	Maggie: "I'm just going to act and dress how I want to, and whatever you say will not offend me. I don't really give a fuck."
Heightened Sense of Empathy & Advocacy	Participants expressed great empathy for other marginalized groups and/or disadvantaged people in the community. In addition, they possessed a strong sense of duty to serve as advocates in their community with the goal of enacting positive social change.	Ivy: "I'm definitely the kid that's like 'Hey, you're sitting all alone at lunch? Wanna come sit at my table?'"

Findings

My study's findings reveal many valuable insights about LGBTQ+ adolescents' lived experiences in their families, schools, and rural communities. Seven themes emerged from the data: (1) Outsider Status: Lacking a Rural Sense of Belonging; (2) Conflicting Familial Support; (3) School Victimization and Subsequent Anxiety; (4) Catching a "Vibe" about Teacher Allies; (5) Lack of LGBTQ+ Representation in School; (6) Resilience and Western Toughness; (7) Heightened Sense of Empathy and Advocacy. This data provides rural educators with keen insight of their LGBTQ+ students' lived experiences—and how to support them in schools and communities that often lack resources and/or uphold belief systems which do not always provide LGBTQ+-affirming support.

Outsider Status: Lacking a Rural Sense of Belonging

When asked if they considered themselves to be rural people, participants were hesitant to accept that label despite four of five having grown up in the community and its surrounding areas. Their responses indicated that community members who qualify as "rural" people do so because they adhere to cultural norms and socially accepted stereotypes about rurality. For example, participants described a typical rural resident as someone who grew up on a ranch, wears Western attire, attends church on Sundays, and votes Republican. Based on common stereotypes about rurality, participants believed they somehow did not qualify as rural people or did not *want* to qualify as rural people due to various stigmas associated with rurality. Ivy, the only participant who was not born and raised in the community, referred to locals as "basic people" who were "close-minded" and did not like or "celebrate" diversity. Ultimately, participants positioned themselves as marginalized others—outsiders who lacked a rural sense of belonging (RSOB).

A Close-Up Introduction of Oliver

Oliver is an eighteen-year-old high school graduate who is taking a semester off before pursuing a music degree at an in-state college. The bedroom walls of his childhood home are lavender and lined with twinkle lights. A huge stereo sits on a shelf behind him as well as a poster that reads: "Trans Rights are Human Rights." Oliver wears a black t-shirt, has a lip piercing, and his dark hair is swept to one side of his face. I taught Oliver for two consecutive years, and at the end of his sophomore year, he came out to me in an essay he'd written for my English class. The first line read: "This is a tale about a boy who has been trapped in a girl's body." Reading Oliver's paper—his *coming out story*—changed the trajectory of my career. Oliver's bravery and tenacity in the face of such opposition is the reason this research study exists.

As we settle into the interview, Oliver confesses that 10 a.m. is a bit too early for him. On top of working full-time to save money for tuition, he's also been writing lyrics and playing his guitar late into the night. Music is his passion, his preferred creative outlet. When I ask Oliver to describe his community, he tells me that it's quiet, small, and "everybody knows everybody." Then I ask Oliver if he considers himself to be a rural person. Hesitant, Oliver admits that he's "rural" in the sense that he grew up in a rural place, but along with coming out as transgender during his junior year, his physical appearance and aesthetic set him apart from other residents. Oliver's black clothing, piercings, and dyed hair are all factors which make him feel like an outsider in the rural community where he was raised. He discusses the town's lack of diversity and how the stereotypical resident ranches, hunts, and/or plays sports, activities which do not particularly interest him:

> My aesthetic doesn't really scream "rural." I guess you could say like, the faces [of locals] get repetitive in a way. There's a lot of ranch kids… people who dress up in jeans and plaid shirts, like FFA kids, basically.

A Close-Up Introduction of Quinn

Speaking of "FFA kids," Quinn is an active member of Future Farmers of America, an extracurricular activity which has given him a deep appreciation of all-things agriculture. He is sixteen years old—a junior in high school. He has blonde hair, wears a gray sweatshirt and glasses, and tells me that after some identity exploration, he identifies as a gay cisgender man. Quinn also tells me that photography and painting are two creative outlets which give him a sense of purpose—but also set him apart from his peers who prefer playing sports (and have labeled him the "art kid"). Upon Quinn's navy-blue bedroom walls hang various pieces of art and a rainbow pride poster which reads "Love is Love" in an elegant white font. A recent snowstorm has made our internet connection a bit glitchy, so whenever either of our screens malfunction, we get a good laugh at each other's ridiculous frozen faces.

I ask Quinn if he considers himself to be a rural person to which he responds: "I do and I don't at the same time. It's kind of a duality." Of all participants, Quinn seems to have the most reverence for his rural home based on his interest in agriculture—a respected industry in rural America. Quinn tells me that his great-great grandparents were homesteaders in the area and established themselves by farming and ranching, a lineage of which he is proud and honors through his involvement in FFA.

Yet despite Quinn's ancestral roots in the community, he minimizes his rural identity, admitting that he lives in town (not on a farm or ranch), and while vacationing in a large city, he enjoyed the "busyness" and anonymity he felt compared to his rural home. Quinn's responses

indicate that because of his "duality" (i.e. he enjoys both agriculture *and* art, two activities which seemingly cannot coexist), somehow Quinn is disqualified from identifying as a proper rural person whose existence must adhere to rigid cultural norms and stereotypes:

> The downside [of living here] is if you don't have that perfect cookie cutter [existence], sometimes you're just gonna fall through the cracks. [But] whether or not I am the "art kid," I still have many memories of sitting in the pickup while it was calving season or branding season, or even irrigating… I still have very fond memories of that.

A Close-Up Introduction of Maggie

Maggie is twenty-one years old and is staying at her childhood home for the summer. Her hair is cut short, she wears a tie-dyed T-shirt, and leans comfortably on the bedframe in her sage green bedroom. When the interview begins, Maggie is smiling and laughing, and it feels like I'm catching up with an old friend. She talks about her health, reminisces about our school play days, and shows me her stuffed lobster which lives on her bedside table.

After graduating, Maggie took off a semester due to COVID-19, but she now attends an out-of-state college which is widely known for its support of LGBTQ+ students. Maggie tells me that because she attends a "very queer school," she's had the opportunity to explore her gender identity, referring to is as a "journey" she's been on since graduating from high school. Maggie speaks of her identity as a queer cisgender woman casually and tells me a story about an elderly couple who, a couple weeks prior, called her "young man" while she was at work. She laughs and says: "I just think it's great, and [being misgendered is] not something that bugs me very much."

I ask Maggie if she considers herself to be a rural person, and she says "maybe... in a different type of way." Maggie admits that although she loves the "comfort and quietness" of

rural places, she has thoroughly enjoyed living in a large city (whose population is triple the state of Montana's *entire* population). There are aspects of her hometown that she misses (like easy access to nature), but Maggie's responses ultimately illustrate that she has always lacked a RSOB and feels marginalized in her hometown. She tells me the community is "tight-knit"—but only for people who possess certain religious and/or political beliefs. Although she grew up attending church with her family, Maggie's responses indicate she never shared the community's religious or conservative values which ultimately created a sense of separation from other residents:

> In a lot of ways, I never felt supported by my community, especially because… I guess the community focuses on things that I am not. There's an aspect of togetherness for specific people… especially if you go to church, you have a support system there; if you work certain places, you have a strong support system. But I would say that this is a majority Republican, conservative town, and everyone is just in an echo chamber in that way.

A Close-up Introduction of Cedric

Cedric is twenty-years old, and like Maggie, they are living in their childhood home for the summer, working to save money for their out-of-state college tuition. They are the only participant who appears to have chosen a communal area to speak with me. The room looks like a storage space and contains a kitchenette, bookshelves, and a guest bed. Cedric is a self-proclaimed introvert with a sensitive "social battery" and is visibly nervous during the interview, continually tugging at the front of their polo shirt and shifting in their seat. The evening prior to their interview, Cedric sent me a message and asked what kind of questions to expect, so I sent them a screenshot of the interview to ease their mind.

During the interview, Cedric admits they've never had the opportunity to discuss their gender identity so openly and describes the experience as "weird" and "new." Cedric tells me that they identify as nonbinary, leaning towards transmasculine but also perhaps androgyny; they are still figuring it out and express relief that they attend such a queer-friendly college which honors students' unique and evolving gender identities.

Oliver, Quinn, and Maggie had their reasons for feeling like outsiders, but Cedric tells me they never felt the "togetherness" Maggie spoke of mainly because of their geographical distance from the community. Like many rural-living adolescents, Cedric grew up in a remote area located fifteen miles away from where they attended seventh through twelfth grade. Cedric's elementary years were spent in a one-room schoolhouse with only three other students, an experience which Cedric said socially "stunted" them and ultimately made it difficult to foster and maintain friendships. When they began seventh grade in town, Cedric said they felt "sheltered" and were dubbed "the out-of-town person" because all their classmates had all grown up together. I ask Cedric if they consider themself a rural person to which they respond: "At one point I technically did, but now that I have been [living in a city], I find that life a lot better. And I associate more with [city life] because it gives me the freedom of what I want to do."

Along with geographical isolation, Cedric also discusses the community's lack of diversity and adherence to heteronormative tradition which aided in their tenuous RSOB:

> I feel like if you are different from the normative, you will be shunned. [Also], everything is super far out, so it's like "Oh, I want to go see my friend, but they live on a farm five miles [away]." There's not much to do [in the community] unless it's with a sport, and then those get very gendered once you're past twelve. So, it's not very inclusive to everybody, and that sense of community only applies to those who fit in it.

A Close-up Introduction of Ivy

Ivy is seventeen years old and has just started her senior year of high school. Unlike the other participants, Ivy was born and raised elsewhere: an urban area in California which had multiple high schools. It wasn't until her/their sophomore year that she/they moved to Montana under the guardianship of her/their grandparents. Identifying as nonbinary, Ivy tells me that she/they were a "tomboy" while growing up and preferred friendships with boys; however, lately she/they have been spending time with girls and have become more interested in "girly" things like experimenting with makeup, trying new hairstyles, and painting her/their fingernails. Ivy has an eclectic look: she/they wear a silver heart necklace and sports gold retro glasses, has septum and lip piercings, and waves around freshly manicured fingernails which are painted periwinkle blue. I notice her/their nails because when deep in thought, she/they look into the distance and repeatedly tap her/their lips with an index finger.

During the interview, Ivy is perched on her/their bed where she/they crafted and hung a light pink canopy curtain which takes up most of the screen. Upon the white bedroom walls are various art pieces and a yellow mock road sign which reads "Butterfly Crossing." Ivy speaks swiftly and confidently, exuding the energy of a free spirit who enjoys art, drama, and crafting jewelry to sell at the local farmer's market. When asked to describe the community where she/they live, Ivy struggles and refers to it as "boring" multiple times. Eventually, she/they tell me: "There's nothing to describe. It's just like—it feels like there's mainly just old people, and there's lots of bars and churches." Then I ask Ivy if she/they consider herself/themself to be a rural person—to which I receive a hard "No."

Like other participants, Ivy also highlights the town's lack of diversity. She/they identifies as nonbinary, one factor which makes her/them feel an acute sense of otherness. In

addition, Ivy's responses also indicate that being an "out-of-stater" who moved to Montana during high school makes her/them feel like a stranger in a strange land—a stranger who possesses no RSOB:

> I do feel very outsider because people in my class, they've known each other since kindergarten, and that's just how it is. I still feel like I'm not in the same category as these people. I feel like there is a stereotype, at least just in Montana in general. Like, "Oh Californians—waah! We don't need this!" I like change, and I like difference, but it feels like… change and difference here is not allowed. It's shunned.

Due to various factors, my participants did not possess a strong RSOB. Being queer certainly aided in their feelings of marginalization, but their collective disinterest in popular sports also contributed to their outsider status. For example, Maggie played soccer, a sport that was not affiliated with the school. Because soccer wasn't recognized as an MHSA[3] sport like basketball, football, or volleyball, Maggie lacked a sense of belonging in the community: "For someone who played [soccer] but was not involved in the community very much, I felt abandoned," she told me. "Just not very supported in any way." Quinn discussed how he disliked sports but was more than willing to attend games for a different reason than most: "My brother might be at the basketball game watching the game; I'll be at the basketball game taking pictures of the basketball game." Ivy also talked about the community's interest in sports, calling them the town's "main attraction." She/they also described the school as a "popularity contest" in which students must engage in socially accepted activities to be acknowledged and supported. Additionally, Ivy expressed that if a person does not adhere to the socially accepted norms which

[3] Montana High School Association

align with rurality, they are shunned. “Montana is such a beautiful state,” she/they said. “There’s pretty nature—but not pretty personalities. When there is [diversity], it’s not celebrated.”

Ultimately, participant responses indicated that to qualify as a rural person who *belongs*, one must dress a particular way, behave a certain way, engage in socially accepted activities, and possess beliefs and values which adhere to rural cultural norms. And because they felt like outsiders, participants expressed that they did not possess a strong RSOB, describing themselves as “hidden” and “unheard,” and in Maggie’s case, “bitter” about the lack of community support while growing up.

Conflicting Familial Support

All five participants expressed that at least someone—a parent, a sibling, or a grandparent—was supportive of their LGBTQ+ identity (or, in Ivy’s case, *would* be supportive if she/they broached the subject with them). Yet, participants also discussed other family members who were not as supportive—or entirely unsupportive. These family members would often misgender participants, call them by their dead names, use anti-LGBTQ+ language, and in Oliver’s case, send mixed messages about support. In addition to feeling familial tension, participants also felt like it was their responsibility to educate family members about LGBTQ+ issues, ultimately becoming spokespeople and/or poster children for queerness.

Cedric told me that their gender identity was a “touchy subject” for their “very religious” parents who still dead-named them. Subsequently, Cedric expressed their discomfort being back home due to their family’s Christian values and constant dismissal of their name and pronouns; however, they did express greater levels of support from their brothers:

> I’m too afraid to push too hard [about my name and pronouns], especially with my parents around, because [they’re] like “Ugh, the gay agenda!” But I’m working on that.

> My six-year-old brother [is] constantly saying [my name] and correcting them, but they still don't fully accept, so it's a weird situation. And then my oldest brother Gavin, he was very accepting as soon as I told him. He was like, "Oh, you should have told me sooner!"

Oliver told me that his family "kind of understands" what it means to be a transgender person, "but at the same time, not really." Oliver also discussed conflicting support from his family members, namely his father and mother who possess differing views about his transgender identity. Oliver appreciated his father's support, but his mother's support (or lack thereof) felt confusing to him:

> I'm kind of lucky to have the family that I do because they're—at least on my dad's side anyway—they're pretty supportive… my sister understands, my niece understands, [and] my nana on my mom's side, she fully supports me. My mom is interesting because she doesn't support me, but at the same time, she's okay with it. I don't know, it just doesn't make sense to me. Basically, she just said "You can identify as whoever you want to be and be whatever you want to be, but I'm never going to see you as that."

Like Oliver, Ivy's mom refused to acknowledge her/their gender identity. For reasons she/they did not share, Ivy moved to Montana to live with her/their grandparents during her/their sophomore year. Regarding her/their gender identity, Ivy said that her/their grandparents avoid the subject and "don't really talk about it." However, she/they were confident that upon having a discussion with them, her/their grandparents would be supportive guardians:

> I had tried telling my mom that I didn't feel—I was like "I don't feel like a girl." Like, it feels off or something. And she just got mad about it… my main person was not supportive at all and still isn't. [My grandparents] don't really understand certain things,

> so I feel like there would be a lot of misunderstanding [if we discussed my gender identity], but I think besides that, they'd be supportive.

Quinn referred to himself as "privileged" to have "loving, supportive" parents whom he came out to when he was in junior high. He reported that his older sister is also supportive and sends him a care package each June for Pride month. Although Quinn's parents and sister were accepting, he called his brother's support "iffy" and discussed moments of "contention" between them. Quinn said that brother often uses anti-LGBTQ+ language and expresses contempt for queer people:

> I love him, but he's kind of almost got this mentality of like, I can be gay, but other people can't. So, sometimes when he'd be talking about certain things, especially about other queer kids and just people in the LGBTQ community in general, sometimes I'd feel a little bit attacked—and in a way, it is a little bit of an attack. He's not horrible to me, but there's just some things where I'm like "Kid, you can't say this stuff."

Maggie spoke highly of her parents and expressed her appreciation of them "trying their best" to support her. She also said her sexuality was a "sticking point" for her parents who referred to her girlfriend as a "roommate." Despite her evident love for her parents, Maggie's responses illustrated that she felt it was her responsibility to educate them about her sexuality and called them a "work in progress":

> My parents, they love me unconditionally—like, that's their thing. But I think [my sexuality] might be something they aren't quite comfortable just talking about or making it normal. They're just really accepting parents in general. I don't know, it's kind of like they have to unlearn some things and figure it out because they are devoutly Christian, so that's another whole layer [of complexity]. I just have to keep working at it because… if

> we both kind of ignore it then nothing is going to happen, so I have to be better about that.

Overall, conflicting levels of acceptance and support between family members created strain and confusion for participants, often making their homes uncomfortable places to inhabit—and in some cases, estranged them from their loved ones.

School Victimization & Subsequent Anxiety

Consistent with existing research reporting high rates of school victimization among rural LGBTQ+ youth (De Pedro et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2023), Ivy, Quinn, and Oliver were out during high school and discussed many instances in which they experienced peer harassment and hostility—mostly in the form of microaggressions and discursive violence which resulted in elevated levels of anxiety.

After Ivy moved to Montana, her/their anxiety levels were so high that she/they would vomit before school each morning. Ivy expressed how openly queer students faced "repercussions," and their straight allies also "get bullied" in school. Ivy discussed many instances of peer harassment but recalled a specific experience with an LGBTQ+ peer who had been victimized during school hours. Despite the physical nature of this encounter, Ivy admitted that most peer hostility and harassment is insidious and thus difficult to identify and report:

> This kid was just talking to me, and he is gay, and he was saying whatever to me… he's just chillin', doing nothing. And then this other kid walked up, and he took a pencil and was like "This is your AIDS shot" and put the pencil on his arm. That is so weird to me. What even makes you think that you can do that? [But] it's honestly so hard to point out [specific things] because I feel like it happens all of the time. Like, every day all of the time, so it's just like, hard to recognize… it's all these little itty-bitty things.

Quinn also discussed his struggles with anxiety but admitted that going to therapy has helped him cope. When he was in junior high, Quinn was outed by a person he considered a friend. Subsequently, many of his peers encouraged him to join their youth group or to get "conversion therapy" when he was thirteen. Quinn described his outing as "messy" because afterwards, his peers referred to him only as "the gay kid." High school was not much better. Quinn described his freshman year as "uncomfortable" and "isolating"—but made light of his peers' bullying—at least it was only verbal:

> I haven't had a physical altercation—yet. I did get picked on a lot by some of my fellow classmates. I remember there were a few experiences of me getting called slurs, either in the hallways or at FFA trips… I feared for my safety. It's like I can't exist as myself without persecution of some sort.

Oliver transitioned between his sophomore and junior years and changed his name. His transition made him a target for harassment and hostility which he described as mostly "passive aggressive." For instance, his peers would call him "Oliver" but would say it with a patronizing tone. Once, his car was keyed in the school parking lot. Oliver told me that his experiences with peers were "dehumanizing"—they would bark at him, tell inappropriate jokes, and make "borderline death threats" which made Oliver feel anxious. Due to his classmates' persistent harassment, Oliver harbored fears about their antagonistic behavior potentially escalating to violence:

> You're in the middle of Montana, and everybody owns a gun, so it's just like, you have that thought in the back of your head that anybody could pull a gun on you because you're in Montana. And so you always had that thought of like "Man, somebody could

> break into my house and come get me" kind of thing. It's always a kind of scary thought to have.

Cedric and Maggie were closeted during high school but still reported high rates of anxiety. Cedric described their high school years as "nerve-wracking." Additionally, Cedric told me they waited until college to come out because they didn't consider Montana a safe state for transgender people:

> If I came out, I know there are some very conservative students in that school where it could be dangerous, and I didn't want to be a target, and I already didn't want attention, so I just had my sweatshirt [and] tried not to show my chest as much. I remember being on the school bus a few times when Trump was [campaigning] and people were talking about voting for him. I would hear some talk about his agendas, and those students were like "Yeah, he's so right, he's correct!" So I was like "Absolutely not!" I could never say anything [about my gender identity].

Maggie had a supportive friend group during high school, many of whom also identified as LGBTQ+; however, her friends collectively determined they couldn't "really explore that here" due to potential peer hostility. Maggie said she never heard anyone blatantly use any anti-LGBTQ+ slurs during high school but admitted that her peers casually used the word "gay" in a derogatory manner. She recalled one incident which caused great anxiety: someone violated her vehicle with a political sticker in the school parking lot, and afterwards Maggie feared for her safety:

> Some shitheads from school put a Trump sticker on my car, and I was like "Okay, that's actually a threat almost." And I think I told my parents about it, and they weren't—they were just like "Oh, that's messed up, but it's not that bad, right?" And I just looked at

> them and was like "If only you knew how scary that was" because obviously these kids are trying to say something, and they're trying to be really harmful—like a threat, literally. That's what it felt like, a threat.

Due to their peers' harassment and hostility, all participants expressed elevated levels of stress and anxiety. Fortunately, no participants reported physical assault, but all discussed more subtle forms of harassment and antagonism, mainly in the form of microaggressions and discursive violence. Participants expressed how these negative experiences subsequently resulted in their inability to focus during class, feel safe on school grounds, or establish a RSOB among the student body.

Catching a "Vibe" about Teacher Allies

Participants used the word "vibe" to explain how they knew if teachers were supportive of LGBTQ+ people—and therefore safe to confide in. Overall, participant responses illustrated that because teachers rarely discussed LGBTQ+ issues or actively advocated for queer students (e.g. advising the GSA club), they were uncertain which teachers were LGBTQ+ allies and simply had to make educated guesses about teachers' level of support.

As older participants, Maggie and Cedric saw no blatant indicators of teacher allyship while in high school and had to infer about which teachers would support them if they chose to come out. Cedric discussed how none of their teachers were "openly hostile" but seemed rather "indifferent" about LGBTQ+ people and issues. Cedric told me how they would determine a teacher's "vibe" by paying close attention to their character, classroom procedures, and the way they interacted with students:

> I [determined teacher allyship by] their personality and views that I understood that they had. Like oh, this person [is] fine with this going on in their classroom, they set up things

> this way, they communicate with students, and try to get an understanding of what they can do to help you. Or they seem like someone who would be safe if you wanted to communicate about a deeper topic. That's the kind of vibe you look for in someone.

Maggie told me that she wished her teachers would have "[stepped] up" by openly discussing gender and sexuality and created "safe spaces" for queer students to exist authentically. She also expressed her belief that LGBTQ+ students shouldn't have to guess which teachers are supportive and which are not:

> You can tell in the way [teacher allies] teach and the way they interact with students that they care about every single student no matter what… but directly addressing [gender and sexuality] would be helpful. Just in every facet, like "Yeah, gay people exist, it's fine. We don't practice hate in this classroom. If you practice hate, you're out."

Oliver, Quinn, and Ivy discussed how some teachers displayed pride posters in their classrooms, a gesture that was appreciated—but ultimately not enough. Oliver also told me there was no "sense of security" for queer students in the school; however, after many "older" teachers resigned during his junior year (myself among them), younger educators replaced them and seemed to have more progressive views about LGBTQ+ issues. Oliver explicitly stated how the school's administrators were unsupportive which he believed influenced his teachers' hesitancy to make their support known:

> There's still a couple teachers there today that are really not supportive… and a lot of it has to do [with] the principal and superintendent. They act supportive, but they're not really supportive… they don't actually support you; they just say that they do so they don't get sued or whatever.

Quinn discussed how he wanted his teachers to be more "open to reality" about queer issues. He reported that most of his teachers were getting better about using students' preferred pronouns and not "dead naming" transgender and nonbinary students; however, some teachers were still "old fashioned" and had "18th century" views of queerness. He told me about one teacher who seemed hostile: "I do not feel comfortable talking to her. She's got a whole vibe going on [and is] very much so against [queer people]." Another teacher, however, illustrated her support by speaking up. Unfortunately, she left the school after one year of teaching:

> Last year we had a new science teacher… I loved her so much because she would actually call people out on their bullshit. And she did it even with my own brother. He would try to be stupid and press her buttons and say inappropriate stuff sometimes. Nothing gross, but inappropriate… and she would snap at him and be like "Dude. That's not right. Like, if you lived in a bigger city, you'd probably get beat up for saying something like that. Don't say stuff like that."

Ivy said that her/their teachers never openly discussed LGBTQ+ issues which made it hard to identify allies. "It's not even a discussion," she/they told me. Ivy struggled to name any teachers she/they felt were allies but eventually reported that her/their journalism teacher once asked her/them questions about the GSA and expressed excitement about the club's existence. Overall, Ivy discussed how she/they wanted more obvious signs that teachers were advocates for LGBTQ+ students:

> I wish that there were an actual teacher at our school that was like, "Hey, I'll [advise the GSA]!" or something like that. I haven't really heard any teachers flat-out say "Hey, I'm here if anyone needs to [talk]." Not having a known support system really sucks.

Ultimately, because participants' teachers did not make their allyship obvious, queer students had to rely on vibes—guessing, inferring, and theorizing about teacher allyship—and hoping they were correct.

Lack of LGBTQ+ Representation in School

Participants had very little or no exposure to any LGBTQ+ related topics, events, issues, characters, or historical figures in their classes. Collectively, they struggled to recall any LGBTQ+ lessons taught, assignments given, or activities they engaged in during their time in high school. Oliver, Ivy, and Quinn told me that certain teachers allowed them to choose LGBTQ+ topics for particular assignments, but queer issues were never a part of a teacher's standard curriculum.

Oliver discussed how choosing an LGBTQ+ related topic for a project was acceptable in his history class, but besides that, queer issues and events were never the norm:

> I guess the most that really happened with assignments that were LGBT-based was like, for one of the history teachers, he had us—basically doing research papers on certain events throughout history, and you know, if you picked an LGBT event for your history paper, then that's what you picked.

Despite getting to create an LGBTQ+ themed project in her/their history class, Ivy felt deterred to choose another in the future based on her/their peers' snide comments about her/their art piece which depicted gay rights activist Marsha P. Johnson. Ivy also discussed how her/their middle school health teacher in California taught lessons about gender and sexuality; however, when she/they moved to Montana, her education on the topic ceased: "I was surprised because there wasn't anything [taught] about gender or sexuality or anything like that." Additionally, Ivy

told me that her/their high school teachers would gloss over the fact that many renowned artists and authors were queer:

> [Leonardo Da Vinci] actually went to jail multiple times for being gay, and nobody even knows this! I feel like literally just acknowledging that LGBTQ people exist [would be helpful].

Like Ivy, Quinn also expressed disappointment about his health class because the curriculum was "fully tailored" to straight students: "I hated that [class]," he told me. This class's heteronormative approach was disappointing because Quinn felt like he was being denied information that would have helped him better understand his sexuality. In English, Quinn said that he could write about personal experiences but told me that there were no other "opportunities" to explore LGBTQ+ topics in other classes. Quinn also spoke about his school's library—which stored LGBTQ+ themed books in a back room:

> [The librarian] does keep a select reading. However, I think there's a good portion she's not allowed to have [displayed] in the library, but if kids asked her for it, she'd be more than willing to give it to them… I do believe she has a stash in the back, and if someone asked her for it, she'd be more than willing to give them a book.

Like Ivy's and Quinn's health classes which lacked LGBTQ+ representation, Cedric reported that gender and sexuality weren't covered in their high school science classes either. Cedric hypothesized how if these topics *were* part of the curriculum, most students wouldn't have taken them seriously anyway (or would have tried to "disprove" the concept of gender identity). Overall, Cedric couldn't recall any LGBTQ+ representation in their high school curriculum, not even in the literature students read in English classes:

> I don't think any of the books that I had read for classes had [queerness] as a prominent theme or even had a [queer] background character… like, it's one book. It's not going to kill all your [straight] students if there's a little representation.

Maggie reported how she didn't learn anything about LGBTQ+ history until college: "I didn't know anything about the activists in New York during the Stonewall Riots. I thought Harvey Milk was just a guy with a funny name, but he was an actual gay politician." Maggie also told me about the first time an LGBTQ+ topic appeared in school: when she filled out a statewide survey which asked students if they identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community:

> Not even a whisper. I think that [survey] was the first and only time. I can't really think of any specifics for assignments or anything like that. Nothing stands out crazily. I remember—this is semi-related to your class because you had the Shakespeare class—[*Twelfth Night*]. When Shakespeare in the Parks did that play for us, I was like "This is so gay, this is awesome!"

Participants also discussed reasons why they thought there was a lack of representation in rural schools: damaging LGBTQ+ stigmas, the administration's indifference to Title IX, a conservative school board, and potential parental "backlash" against teachers who dared to broach the subject.

Resilience & Western Toughness

When asked to describe their experience growing up in a rural community in just three words, participants mainly used negative adjectives: *confusing*, *isolating*, *tough*, *unenjoyable*, and *awful*. Oliver chose "hell on earth" as his response. Quinn asked if he could use four words and stated: "I want to leave." Other participants described how they felt as community members:

hidden and *unheard*. Despite the negative language participants used to describe their experiences, they also acknowledged many positive aspects of rural life, and all expressed how they were more resilient people because of the adversity they faced. Despite their strength and resilience, participants had clearly developed unhealthy coping mechanisms and displayed attitudes which minimized or negated their difficult and oftentimes painful experiences.

Regarding peer hostility and harassment, Oliver discussed how he'd become desensitized to his peers' abusive behavior: "I'm kind of used to [peer hostility] because I pretty much grew up with that. So, coming out—it wasn't the biggest deal ever in my brain." Oliver believed his ability to endure hostility and harassment was a positive skill he developed in high school. He minimized his negative experiences with the assumption that everyone's high school experience is unenjoyable. Ultimately, Oliver was optimistic about his future and planned to find like-minded people at a state college where he would pursue a music degree:

> [Living here] made me more—I guess, able to take people's shit. Obviously if somebody walks up and starts harassing me, I'm gonna get angry, but I've basically been able to take in people's energy and not give my energy back to them… it's high school, and it's shitty, and it sucks, but there's so much more that you can do outside of high school that will be better for you. You aren't stuck here.

Ivy told me that because she/they had only endured two years (not a lifetime) of peer hostility, she/they could identify it more easily than other LGBTQ+ students like Oliver: "The kids that have grown up here… they're so used to [being harassed]. It's crazy." Along with the advantage of moving to Montana late in her education, Ivy also expressed how her/their GSA club helped her/them to identify her peers' microaggressions—and gave her/them the courage to

defend her/themself. Although Ivy reported that her/their tenacity and resilience resulted in decreased peer hostility, she/they admitted she/they disliked constant confrontation:

> I've learned how to handle [harassment] and how to recognize [microaggressions]. I'm standing up for myself, and now I feel way more confident—and also people have stopped [harassing me]. And that's awful because I like being quiet. No one wants to have to be like "Oh, I've got to stand up for myself right now," you know? Nobody wants to do that.

After being outed in junior high, Quinn told me that he developed a "hate everybody first" mentality to protect himself. In addition, he confessed that his anxiety recently escalated to full blown panic attacks. Quinn discussed how he exists in a constant state of defense and elaborated on his trust issues: "I think a lot of [my peers] will jump into relationships with a bit of blind trust. I still have my guard up a little bit [because] I really don't know what to expect with a lot of people." For example, Quinn recalled an encounter in which someone gave him a compliment, but he initially thought she was harassing him:

> I was with my—well, was boyfriend at the time—in line to get slushies, and I was wearing a little pride flag necklace, and the employee that was working at the stand said something about it, and my first reaction was like "Oh shit. This is my moment where something is gonna happen." It was a compliment, but I still had that anxiety… I still have my guard up a little bit.

Maggie, the eldest participant, looked back on her high school years and described her experience as a closeted queer woman as "informative." She was in good spirits and made jokes through most of her interview; however, when Maggie discussed how the community had shaped

her character, she became serious and reflective, claiming how the lack of support and resources for queer adolescents ultimately forces them to become resilient:

> [Living here] helped me to be hard working and not to rely on others because they weren't going to be there for me anyway, so I was gonna work hard and get what I wanted [alone]. It was tough, but it was tough in a way that built me into a stronger, more capable, ready-to-learn person. [But] there's no one to help you or guide you unless it's your friends. There's no resources. I've learned everything that I did from the internet. You're basically in a plane with no pilot.

Cedric's resilience manifested as self-imposed isolation from their community. Because they lived so far out of town, they felt their social skills were lacking and thus found it difficult to connect with their peers and develop healthy friendships. They expressed how attending an out-of-state college gave them the ability to communicate with family members on their own terms and not be "dead-named all the time." Ultimately, they viewed their high school experience as a slippery stepping-stone: something to overcome, leave behind, and forget:

> I never went to prom. I didn't even go to my 8th grade graduation. I don't think I went to my high school graduation party. I was just like, "Yep, I'm gonna go do my own thing." I was mostly just going through the motions: "Yep, high school. I'm here, I'm gone." And now it's just something I can leave behind me. I am just glad to be out of there. And now that I'm out, I'm more myself.

Although participants were undeniably resilient in the face of adversity, a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" Western mentality permeated their responses, and rather than dwell on their negative experiences, they chose to highlight positive ones; however, to cope and survive,

participants exuded tough bravados, displayed fierce independence, and engaged in isolating behaviors. Their resilience, although inspiring, came at a cost.

Heightened Sense of Empathy & Advocacy

The most compelling theme was my participants' ability—and willingness—to empathize with other marginalized groups and disadvantaged people. In addition to their heightened sense empathy, all participants expressed a desire to advocate for others. They shared how they wished community members would be more "open minded" regarding others' experiences—particularly people of color, their peers with intellectual disabilities, those suffering from mental illness, disabled community members, elderly residents, and of course, queer people. Participants also discussed how they believed most community members shirked their civic duties, and several expressed how they felt like it was their responsibility to advocate for other outsiders, ultimately ensuring everyone in the community felt accepted and supported.

Cedric discussed how the school should do a better job of highlighting the importance of Black History Month. Regarding advocacy efforts, Cedric was most concerned with recent legislative actions which were actively banning and removing books from school libraries—books that could be lifesaving resources for rural BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students:

> With all these bans of books whether it be Black history or LGBTQ, they're being removed from schools. I don't know if it's quite hit Montana schools yet, but [minorities are] just being pushed back, secluded. No one wants to hear about [social justice issues] even though [they are] currently happening.

Maggie reported how the community's diversity is often "glossed over" with the assumption that all residents are "white, straight whatever." She told me about two African American students who were called the "n-word" when she was in high school. "Those poor

students. It's so unsafe for them," she lamented. "It is just awful. I feel bad for the people of color in that school." In addition to her concern for people of color, Maggie also discussed safety issues regarding a trail at a nearby recreational site: "It would be so cool if [Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks] maintained these trails better so people could actually get around, [especially] older people. If they wanted to go around and look at all the really cool stuff, it's kind of dangerous." Maggie even expressed concern for the community's vegans and vegetarians who live in a place whose economy relies on ranching. Her sense of social justice was strong, and she openly discussed the hypocrisy of fellow church goers:

> What I was taught in church was you are nice to everybody, you don't treat anyone differently, you don't have biases because that's not okay. I think that the community just strengthened me [into] being really strong and treating everyone fairly and nicely no matter who they are—and just trying to be the best person I can be because I feel like some people slack on it a lot. It's like, "You guys are so hypocritical. What is wrong with you?" You're not supposed to dictate and control your neighbors; you're supposed to leave them alone and love them. That isn't hard, it's not.

Quinn used the analogy of a "cookie cutter" existence multiple times and believed that those who didn't fit that social mold were ostracized. Based on his own positive experiences with therapy, Quinn told me how he was considering becoming a therapist himself. Quinn also works at the local medical facility and sees firsthand the care (or lack thereof) residents receive. He expressed how the community needed a better "understanding of mental health and more open mindedness [about] why we should be taking care of it." Overall, Quinn's greatest concern was for community members who are suffering from mental illness but cannot access specialized care due to geographical isolation and a lack of resources:

> We only have one or two mental health professionals in the entire town, and I'm fortunate enough to go to a therapist that is in town. I used to have to go to [another city] every other week in order to go to therapy. So, I think a lot of medical resources we also lack. Again, I work at a hospital, so if you need a life-saving surgery, you can't get it at the hospital here… and you have to be life flighted because we can't provide that stuff here.

Oliver discussed how there was a lot of discrimination in the community, and if someone was "something different" from the norm, they were shunned. Oliver and Ivy both voiced concern for their peers with intellectual disabilities. At length, Oliver told me about the injustices against an autistic student who was bullied in school—and why Oliver wanted to create an inclusive group for marginalized students: "[The group is] not just for LGBTQ+ people, you know? It's for people of color, people with disabilities. There should be no discrimination. You shouldn't have to feel alone in high school." Oliver, a rather stoic person, became more animated when discussing the injustices he witnessed in his school. Fed up with his peers' treatment of his autistic peer, Oliver repeatedly reported the bullying to administration and encouraged his classmates to do so as well. Despite his efforts, Oliver claimed the bullies faced no repercussions:

> We have a serious problem here, you know? There are people in the community that don't feel safe. And that's when I was like "Alright, we have to go talk to people and make this community safe for [everyone]" because growing up I experienced a lot for being who I am. I know that there are people here that are struggling with the same stuff, and I can help those people. And so, you know, I like being able to help people who are in this situation because it's not fair to them to be treated like how I was treated.

Ivy reflected on feminist author Chimamanda Adichie's Ted Talk "The Danger of a Single Story" and expressed how her/their peers viewed marginalized students not as sentient, whole, complex human beings—but rather, whatever made them different or "other." She/they also shared beliefs about why she/they thought her/their peers were hostile to students who deviate from the rural norm: "I feel like people get one idea in their head of a person and then, that's it. They can't see you in any other light. [And] when kids have been thinking a certain way for so long, and nobody says anything, then they're gonna keep thinking that way." Ivy's desire to advocate was palpable throughout the interview. She/they expressed how she/they wanted to pursue a career in special education to work with children who had learning disabilities. Ivy also discussed how she/they will often invite loner students to join her/their lunch table and told me how she/they felt it was her/their duty to take nervous underclassmen under her/their wing on the first days of school:

> I am kind of trying to make it be known, at least to some freshmen, that I'm also queer and that I'm an open person. I feel the need to stand out more [and] let my acceptance of others be known more so because I feel like I almost have to make up for others. All of us are looking for some form of acceptance, so I might as well be that person.

Overall, participants' responses indicated that because they had experienced discrimination and prejudice firsthand, they had no difficulty identifying the injustices committed against others and could empathize with them. Furthermore, their sense of duty to advocate for other marginalized groups and disadvantaged people was overwhelming—and certainly something to be celebrated and explored in rural classrooms.

Discussion

This research study explores two questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents residing in rural Montana? (2) How can rural educators become LGBTQ+ allies in their schools and communities? My findings contribute to existing research which examines adolescent LGBTQ+ experiences in a rural context; however, it's the first research endeavor to survey participants in the Mountain West—specifically, Montana. Other studies referenced examine LGBTQ+ youth's experiences in the Midwest, the Southeast, and the Pacific Northwest. I am pleased to expand our geographical understanding of LGBTQ+ youth's lived experiences and am honored to highlight five queer voices from Montana, my home state.

Seven themes emerged in the data which illustrate participants' experiences within their family units, high school, and rural community. Their responses provide insights about growing up queer in the rural Mountain West and offer rural educators many allyship ideas to create more inclusive, equitable educational spaces. As it pertains to my second research question, **LGBTQ** means that rural educators must:

- **Listen** to queer students.
- **Give** queer students support.
- Foster queer students' rural sense of **Belonging.**
- **Transform** rural classrooms and communities.
- **Question** damaging beliefs about gender & sexuality.

L – *Listen* to Queer Students

First, rural educators must **listen** to queer students to better understand and empathize with their lived experiences. My participants told me, in detail, about their experiences—in their homes, school, and community. Based on their responses about conflicting familial support, peer

harassment and hostility in school, and their inability to identify teacher allies, educators can surmise that rural LGBTQ+ youth feel tension in their homes and anxiety in their schools—and confusion in both. They live with constant uncertainty regarding adult support, feel unease in our classrooms, and they fear that peers' microaggressions will escalate to violence. It is of utmost importance that rural educators **listen** to queer students' lived experiences. When we **listen**, we gain perspective about LGBTQ+ students' family dynamics, in-school experiences, and how they perceive us—their teachers—as figures of indifference or as powerful allies.

Parents and guardians can be teachers' greatest allies in our efforts to support queer adolescents; however, they might also oppose our allyship efforts. Thus, it is important to **listen** to LGBTQ+ students' lived experiences with their families (if they are willing to share them). In many cases, LGBTQ+ youth are not raised in accepting households, and guardians do not support their identity development process. In addition, LGBTQ+ youth who disclose their sexual orientation to their families experience "higher rates of physical and verbal abuse as well as higher suicide attempt rates" (Roe, 2017, p. 1). Although my participants reported having loving and accepting family members, they also discussed other family members who were not so supportive; therefore, their homes were places of varying levels discomfort and tension. And rather than family members educating themselves about the nuances of gender and sexuality, many parents and grandparents simply dismissed the subject, and some family members were openly hostile. Unfortunately, participants felt like it was their job to educate their parents, siblings, and grandparents about LGBTQ+ issues, ultimately becoming spokespeople for queerness—an impossible, thankless job that is not their responsibility. The good news? Many parents and guardians want to support their LGBTQ+ children—but simply don't know how. Fortunately, now more than ever, legal guardians are seeking accurate information about gender

development and are reaching out to local support networks for help (SAMHSA, 2014). Teachers are an integral part of this network, and when we **listen** to our queer students and their guardians, we can work together and form powerful LGBTQ+-affirming systems of support.

Along with feeling conflicting levels of support in their homes, participants reported feelings of distress, confusion, and fear at school—in our classrooms, the hallways, gymnasium, cafeteria, and parking lot. Not surprisingly, hostile school environments contribute to mental health issues and school-related problems for LGBTQ+ youth (Hall et al., 2018). Educators, school counselors, and administrators must **listen** to queer students' lived experiences to gain a better understanding of how teacher training and common educational practices could "unintentionally institutionalize heterosexism" (Roberts et al., 2023, p. 23) and inadvertently harm the students sitting in our classrooms. Not only are many policies and procedures damaging, but so is peer hostility and harassment. Unfortunately, my participants told me many harrowing stories about their peers' homophobic and transphobic language and behavior in school—in our *classrooms*. It's no wonder rural-living queer youth have more negative perceptions of their schools compared to their urban and suburban peers (De Pedro et al., 2018). They are more likely to feel unsafe at school, skip or miss school, feel disconnected from their education, and thus perform poorly in our classes (Hall et al., 2018). High rates of school victimization make school uncomfortable at best—and unbearable at worst. Yet, when rural educators **listen** to LGBTQ+ adolescents' school experiences, we will have a better understanding of how to identify and shut down peer harassment and hostility, making our rural schools safer, more inclusive, and equitable learning spaces.

Teachers must **listen** to queer students' lived experiences. After my participants expressed feeling tension at home and hostility at school, one thing is evident: rural communities

do not provide LGBTQ+ youth with enough spaces to safely exist as their authentic selves. But when we **listen**, we can identify strategies that promote LGBTQ+ support and affirmation (Rand & Paceley, 2022) and help our queer students thrive in rural places.

G – *Give* Queer Students Support

After listening to queer students' lived experiences, rural educators must explore ways to **give** them support. Based on participants' responses about the lack of support, resources, and representation in the classroom, educators can conclude that we need to make ourselves more visible as allies, provide LGBTQ+-affirming support and resources, and create more inclusive, age-appropriate curricula for queer students.

The first thing rural educators can do to **give** support is simple: Honor LGBTQ+ students' chosen names and preferred pronouns. Three of my participants went by names that were not their legal names, and they used pronouns that differed from those assigned at birth. Queer or straight, many students do not go by their full, legal name; nicknames are the norm. By acknowledging students' chosen names and preferred pronouns, we honor their *identities*. The best "rule of thumb" regarding names and pronouns is to choose what is most validating for each student—whatever "helps them to be their most authentic self" (Azano et al., 2020, p. 207). In addition to honoring chosen names and preferred pronouns, educators should use gender inclusive language and avoid terms like "you guys" or "ladies and gentlemen." Instead, employ more inclusive terminology like "class" or "crew" or "everyone" (GLSEN, 2024). By using more inclusive language in the classroom, teachers **give** respect to their queer students and validate their presence—and importance—in rural schools.

Since my participants had difficulty identifying teacher allies, another thing rural educators can do to offer LGBTQ+ support is visual displays of allyship. By making their

LGBTQ+ allyship known, educators become easily identifiable advocates for queer students who may not have support elsewhere. Visual displays of allyship are obvious and effective, and hanging pride posters or displaying rainbow flags are both worthwhile ways to promote LGBTQ+ inclusivity and safety in rural classrooms. “It's as simple as putting up a poster or even just having a little tiny pride flag magnet on their cabinet or something,” Oliver told me. “Just show that you care about [queer] people.” Displaying pride posters and flags in the classroom is a basic yet powerful illustration of allyship—and based on participant responses, visual displays mean the world to LGBTQ+ students who are proudly out, currently closeted, or who are questioning their identity.

Along with visual displays of allyship, rural educators must create more inclusive curricula. My participants struggled to recall any LGBTQ+ lessons, assignments, or activities that were specifically tailored to queer people and could not see themselves reflected in their heteronormative curricula. Representation matters, and we must find ways to ensure queer students feel represented in our lessons, assignments, and classroom activities. In fact, “representation and inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters, topics, and storylines go a long way in cultivating a more supportive schooling environment for all youth” (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 8). Queer students should see themselves in books they read, the projects the pursue, and the activities designed to engage them. Also, inclusive curricula make rural LGBTQ+ students feel safer, aid in their truancy issues, and “help [them] feel more connected to their schools and accepted by their peers” (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 8). Queering our curricula **gives** LGBTQ+ support and encourages discussions about gender and sexual diversity, ultimately illustrating to LGBTQ+ students that they matter—and they are not alone.

Not surprisingly, a lack of representation has negative effects on queer students' academic achievement and overall well-being. My participants reported how the lack of LGBTQ+ representation in their classes affected not only their levels of engagement but also their understanding of queerness—who they *are*. Queer or straight, every student who attends public school must learn about differences in gender and sexuality "just as they should learn about the world's differing cultural traditions, religious practices, and political systems" (Blackburn & Pennell, 2018, p. 28). By normalizing age-appropriate discussions of gender and sexuality and by questioning the deep-seated beliefs rural places often hold about heteronormativity and gender binaries, teachers not only support their queer students but educate *all* students about the importance of LGBTQ+ equity and inclusivity.

Clearly, allyship comes in many forms, but perhaps the most overt way to illustrate teacher allyship is by advising a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). As older participants, Cedric and Maggie never had the opportunity to be a part of a GSA during high school (Cedric had never even heard of this resource and asked me to explain what it was), but they reported that if they had, their educational experience would have been better: "I probably would have figured out [my] identity a bit sooner than I [did] and had a safer way to explore that," Cedric told me. Maggie's response was similar: "I think [a GSA] would have helped me be more open and not so guarded about my identity. Even just sitting with a group of kids over lunch and just talking would have been valuable."

Although their club was not affiliated with the high school, younger participants did have a GSA and expressed their gratitude for its existence. Oliver told me that on average, five to six students would attend meetings each week. Not only did this club give members a sense of community and support, but it helped participants identify the covert nature of their peers'

hostility and enabled them to stand up for themselves. For instance, Oliver called his GSA experience "enlightening" because members realized their school had violated Title IX on multiple occasions, and with their adviser's guidance, the group took steps to address these violations. Refusing their right to have a GSA was one of them.

Since many rural districts are anti-GSA, it's important for teachers to educate themselves about student—and adviser—rights. Based on two laws, all schools should honor students' right to have a GSA; however, many rural districts blatantly deny students the opportunity to be members of this lifesaving resource. Passed in 1972, Title IX is a law which protects people from discrimination regarding sex, gender, and sexual orientation. The law applies to public schools and any other institutions which receive government assistance (*U.S. Department of Education*, 2021). In addition to Title IX, the Equal Access Act of 1984 also guarantees students the right to have a GSA, recognizing it like any other school-sponsored club (GLSEN, 2024).

Yet before facilitating a GSA, educators should be aware that the club's impact "[varies] widely across schools and geographic contexts," and some rural schools are more accepting of GSAs than others. Unfortunately, one study reported that the presence of a GSA in their school was "associated with *lower* levels of safety" (De Pedro, 2018, p. 275). Despite this anomaly, most research "supports the importance of GSAs for promoting inclusivity, health, and wellbeing" (Rand & Paceley, 2021, p. 33) for queer youth. Overall, teachers who advise GSAs for LGBTQ+ students not only create a space for them to connect, share their experiences, and build community, but they also stand in solidarity with queer students and advocate for their safety, inclusion, and welfare in rural schools. Despite my participants' collective appreciation of having a GSA, Ivy expressed her/their disappointment about how none of her/their teachers advised the club; to her/them, this would have been an appreciated display of allyship. The

presence of their GSA **gave** participants agency and a greater sense of belonging, yet having one of their teachers advise the club would have been ideal to members.

Advising a GSA is a large commitment, one that not every educator is able to make. As rural teachers, demands are high, our plates are full, and we are spread incredibly thin; that's precisely why I reached out to a local nonprofit organization for GSA resources and support. Fortunately, there are many other ways to advocate for queer students and **give** them the support they need. If anything, it is imperative that teachers speak out against any discriminatory language and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in our rural classrooms. As Quinn told me: "The teachers that I know are really good allies are the ones that stand up and say stuff" when queer students are targeted. For instance, Quinn's science teacher called out Quinn's brother during class and offered some perspective about his discriminatory language: "If you lived in a bigger city, you'd probably get beat up for saying something like that. Don't say stuff like that," she said. As rural educators, we must help our students unlearn any damaging beliefs they have acquired and also "consider the students who don't identify with the dominant ideas in the community. For them, school is an opportunity to see a successful, caring professional embodying difference in their community" (Azano et al., 2020, p. 101). By addressing and eradicating any discriminatory language in our classrooms, we not only show queer students that we care about their safety and well-being, but we also model appropriate behaviors for students who have some unlearning to do—and simply might not know any better.

Rural educators can become identifiable allies by **giving** queer students support. This support looks like honoring queer students' identities, having visual displays of allyship in our classrooms, striving to make our curricula more inclusive, advising GSAs, and speaking out

against LGBTQ+ hate speech. And when we **give** queer students support, we begin the essential work of fostering their rural sense of belonging in our classrooms and communities.

B – Foster Queer Students' Rural Sense of *Belonging*

When rural educators listen to LGBTQ+ students and give them support, we inadvertently foster their rural sense of **belonging** (RSOB). Based on participants' responses, rural-living queer youth feel like outsiders in their communities and thus lack a RSOB. With this vital information, rural educators can conclude that we must make greater efforts to show LGBTQ+ students how their rural identities can (and do!) intersect with their queer identities—and ultimately, illustrate that LGBTQ+ people are valued citizens who **belong** in rural places.

Everyone's RSOB fluctuates and is dependent on their lived experiences (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022a), and my participants' negative experiences resulted in a weak (or nonexistent) RSOB. Despite the many benefits to rural life, rural communities have a "tendency to isolate individuals they perceive as outsiders" (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 79), a dominant theme which emerged in my data. Therefore, fostering LGBTQ+ students' RSOB is imperative to their well-being and success in rural schools. When students lack a RSOB, it results in "loneliness, self-hatred, [and] disengagement"; however, when educators do foster LGBTQ+ students' RSOB, we promote "acceptance, authenticity, and finding community as one's true self" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 41; 39).

Based on their responses, if my participants had a stronger RSOB, they would have been happier, more successful, well-adjusted versions of themselves. Instead, they were "in a plane with no pilot" as Maggie said. Rural-living queer youth who possess a strong sense of **belonging** (i.e. those who aren't flying their plane alone) have fewer health risks, lower rates of substance abuse and suicidal behaviors, and less emotional distress at school *and* at home (Blackburn &

Thomas, 2019). This is significant to my findings because participants discussed—at length—their poor mental health, unhealthy coping skills they'd developed, and feelings of isolation and abandonment in their rural community. Fostering a RSOB promotes diversity, helps develop students' identities, minimizes conflict and classroom management issues, and aids in queer students' academic success and well-being (Comber, 2016).

Overall, listening to our queer students and giving them support fosters their RSOB and connects them to place. Queer students must know that to qualify as "rural," they can simply be *themselves*—not a one-dimensional Western caricature or damaging rural stereotype that adheres to cultural norms and preconceived notions about rurality. LGBTQ+ students who feel like they can exist authentically will undoubtedly develop a strong RSOB: a greater sense of community and a greater sense of purpose *within* that community. And a strong RSOB can compel students to act, to engage, and to advocate for themselves and others.

T – *Transform* Rural Classrooms & Communities

When our queer students feel seen, heard, and valued, we can **transform** our rural classrooms and communities. My participants possessed a heightened sense of empathy and the desire to advocate for other marginalized or disadvantaged community members; however, they lacked a vehicle to engage in this work. What if my participants had access to that vehicle? What if they had a teacher who handed them the tools they needed to immerse themselves in advocacy work? Based on participants' responses, educators can surmise that using our classroom to connect students to their community is advantageous in many ways and can lead to positive social change—for *every* rural resident.

One **transformative** tool is place-based education (PBE) which connects students to their locality in ways that cross boundaries between schools and communities (Wynhoff Olsen et al.,

2022b). In essence, PBE uses place as a "jumping off point for imagining possible worlds and different futures" (Comber, 2016, p. 60) for students. The theoretical framework for my research study, Critical Rural English Pedagogy (CREP), is a place-based pedagogical approach which encourages English educators to use their community as the foundation of their English classroom. CREP has several goals in mind. One goal is to *celebrate* rurality and the positive aspects of rural communities—for instance, the local amenities, beautiful landscapes, and residents willing to lend a hand. Too often, rural people and places are depicted negatively, but CREP is a pedagogical tool to change—to **transform**—damaging narratives about rurality.

Like many people, my participants had a limited view of what it meant to be a rural person; in turn, they rejected this label and positioned themselves as outsiders in the community where four of them were born and raised. Because their interests, beliefs, and aesthetics did not align with the stereotypical rural resident, my participants felt "other" and lacked a RSOB. To address this issue, educators can employ CREP in their classrooms and challenge students to not only uncover the positive aspects of their rural homes—but to help them see that many rural people do not align with the damaging stereotypes which too often define them. To qualify as a "rural" person, queer adolescents can simply exist as they are. And by existing authentically, queer youth can **transform** their rural communities into more inclusive, equitable places that celebrate diversity rather than dismiss it.

Along with celebrating the benefits and joys of rural life, CREP also encourages students to *critique* their rural homes, identifying aspects which need to change because "every rural place is fraught with its own challenges, [but] a CREP orientation provides a way for English teachers to move forward and embrace these complexities" (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 83). At CREP's root is social justice—particularly as rural power dynamics and ideologies

"intersect with gender and race" (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 119). My participants not only displayed elevated levels of empathy, but they also possessed a strong desire to advocate for other disadvantaged people in their community. The theme "Heightened Sense of Empathy & Advocacy" is rich with pedagogical possibility for rural educators because CREP also strives to examine inherent "ideologies, issues of representation, and possibilities of social activism" (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 121) in rural places. My participants identified many disadvantaged groups in their community: people of color (POC), the elderly and disabled, peers with intellectual disabilities, those suffering from mental illness, and of course, LGBTQ+ people. After identifying other "outsiders," participants expressed a collective desire to support and advocate for them. By employing CREP in our classrooms and encouraging students to critique their rural homes, we activate their sense of civic duty, help them imagine possibilities that will **transform** their communities, and empower them to become advocates for others—and themselves.

Since this study's participants vocalized their desire to help numerous disadvantaged groups in their community, CREP would be a productive pedagogical tool to unlock advocacy opportunities and engage students in social justice pursuits—with the goal of **transforming** rural schools and communities. By employing CREP, rural teachers have the potential to "expose and disrupt dominant ideas" and "empower students to critically decode the images given to them about rurality" (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 7-8). By giving queer students support, our classrooms can become sites of positive social change; however, place-based pedagogies like CREP take advocacy endeavors a step further. Critical Rural English Pedagogy gives students the chance to identify social justice issues in their communities, develop strategies for marginalized voices to be heard, offer aid to those who need support, and "draw attention to

larger patterns of inequity"—ultimately teaching students how to "resist or change those patterns" (Azano et al, 2020, p. 208) in rural places.

Q – *Question* Damaging Beliefs about Gender & Sexuality

Finally, we must **question** and challenge dangerous belief systems and damaging policies which threaten queer students' academic success as well as their mental, physical, and social-emotional health—beliefs which keep LGBTQ+ people in a constant state of survival. My participants illustrated immense resiliency in the face of hardship and adversity; however, they shouldn't have to fight as tenaciously as they are currently fighting. Their resilience was admirable and inspiring, but it came at a cost to their livelihoods and overall well-being.

In 2023, over eight hundred anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced in the United States—*eight hundred* bills which threaten the rights and humanity of queer people across the nation. In addition, "Don't Say Gay" and "Don't Say Trans" legislation is actively enforcing LGBTQ+ book bans, blocking transgender and nonbinary medical care, and robbing queer people of basic human rights (GLSEN, 2024). Along with fervent anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, rural schools often normalize institutional heterosexism which disadvantages and damages LGBTQ+ students through common practices and policies (Roberts et al., 2023), perpetuating cycles of victimization, ignorance, and discrimination. My participants' responses indicate that their high school has a lot of work to do—at the administrative level *and* in the classroom. By identifying, **questioning**, and challenging heteronormativity and gender binaries, educators can create more equitable school cultures which honor queer students' gender identities, sexuality, and their *existence.* Now more than ever, it is imperative that we **question** harmful, hateful belief systems which relentlessly persecute queer people. By creating more inclusive, equitable, and affirming educational spaces which honor our LGBTQ+ students, educators illustrate that queer people are

deserving of respect, belong in our rural classrooms, and can be resilient in a new way—a way that is not rooted in survival.

Queer resilience comes at a cost. In fact, when compared to their straight peers, rural-living queer adolescents have higher truancy rates, poorer grades, and lower educational aspirations—but the negative effects do not end with academics. Their behavioral development, emotional well-being, and mental health are also adversely affected, resulting in increased rates of substance abuse, self-harm, suicide attempts, and suicidal ideation (De Pedro et al., 2018). Like many queer adolescents, my participants' lived experiences and attitudes illustrate great strength and fortitude in the face of adversity, and rather than dwelling on their negative experiences, they chose to highlight the positive ones; however, their responses also indicate that many of their coping methods are unhealthy and unsustainable. For instance, they spoke of their desensitization to bullying and abuse; they expressed sadness about their queer friends' substance abuse; they described their high anxiety levels and panic attacks; they discussed their crippling depression which made it difficult to attend school—and have hope for their futures. With tears in her eyes during a moment of serious reflection, Maggie told me: "Too many people are actively creating environments that make [queer] teenagers depressed or suicidal or feel like they don't have a future." My fellow educators, this culture must change—and it's within our power to change it.

When we educate ourselves, **question** our preconceived beliefs about gender and sexuality, and challenge far-right conservative ideologies, religious beliefs, and legislation that persecutes queer people, educators can change damaging systems of oppression and combat discrimination in rural schools. Queer students need their teachers' support and guidance if we expect them to thrive in our classrooms. They should not be burdened with the task of educating

their families, their teachers, and their communities about the nuances of gender, sexuality, and queer issues. We are adults; they are children. It is *our* responsibility to educate ourselves, protect and support queer students, and enact positive social change in rural schools.

My participants' responses indicate that LGBTQ+ adolescents spend their high school years confused, terrified, and longing to escape their rural realities. Like any teenager, they are in the process of figuring out who they are, where they belong, and how they can exist authentically—and safely—in rural communities which too often reject them. Queer students need teachers who care, teachers who ask **questions**, teachers who challenge damaging beliefs about gender and sexuality with the goal of making rural classrooms and communities safe, inclusive, equitable spaces where LGBTQ+ adolescents can thrive. Our classrooms can become sites of connection and support for LGBTQ+ youth, but we must stand up for queer students so they feel "safe and empowered" (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019, p. 8) in rural America.

Future Research Endeavors

Future research endeavors could explore the following:

- Family dynamics of rural-living queer youth and how these dynamics affect their schooling, mental health, identity development, and social-emotional learning.
- Psychological implications of school victimization in the form of covert peer abuse like microaggressions and discursive violence.
- Rural-living LGBTQ+ youth's rural sense of belonging (RSOB): reasons it's lacking and how educators can foster queer students' sense of belonging in rural communities.
- Teacher ally work in rural communities: tactics, approaches, opposition, affirmation, and experiences.

- Critical Rural English Pedagogy (CREP) in the classroom: activating students' sense of civic duty and creating advocacy/social justice opportunities for LGBTQ+ students in rural communities.
- Rural-living LGBTQ+ youth's resiliency and the unhealthy coping mechanisms that manifest due to their immense fortitude in the face of adversity.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this research study. First, as the sole researcher, my ability to analyze data was limited. Many studies have teams of researchers collaborating to analyze and code data; this study has one which creates obvious restraints. Next, my participant sample is small. All five participants attended the same rural high school, and their experiences do not necessarily represent the experiences of all LGBTQ+ youth residing in rural Montana—let alone all of rural America. While my study explores LGBTQ+ students' experiences in one rural Montana school, it's important to acknowledge that every rural community is diverse and unique, so this case study may not reflect all queer adolescents' lived experiences. Lastly, my relationship with the participants could have influenced their responses. Because all participants knew me prior (as their former teacher and adviser), they could have tailored their responses to what they thought I'd like most to hear, ultimately skewing the study's data.

Conclusion

As a rural educator who has faced opposition and adversity regarding LGBTQ+ allyship and advocacy, I acknowledge and understand this work is complicated. Opposition and adversity are the reasons my study exists, and I am eternally grateful for the brave, generous humans who shared their stories with me. Theorists Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen (2021) also address the daunting, difficult nature of employing a CREP curriculum: "We recognize that all of this work—from textual choices… to sanctioning class time for students to discuss sexuality—is bold" (p. 90). And yet, viewing rural places as "simple and problem-free… where everyone gets an equal chance at happiness and prosperity is not only a myth but is deeply problematic" (Azano et al., 2020, p. 43). My participants existed as marginalized members of their rural community, and they felt their "otherness" acutely. Rather than flying "in a plane with no pilot," they needed a knowledgeable, influential, caring adult to stand up for them, to support them—to *see* them. Although I saw my queer students, I didn't quite know how to stand up for them because I feared administrative reprimand, irate parents, and community backlash. And I didn't quite know how to support them because no one was supporting *me* in my allyship endeavors.

This study has a dual purpose: to better understand LGBTQ+ students' lived experiences in rural Montana *and* to identify ways teachers can support queer students in communities often bereft of resources—ultimately creating opportunities for them to become catalysts for positive social change. By employing CREP, educators embrace rural complexities with their students and grapple with the discomfort—and epiphanies—which inevitably follow. I have experienced many epiphanies over the course of conducting this research study and look forward to returning to my secondary classroom with the insights and tools I've acquired. Examining our rural spaces is challenging, rewarding, essential work—work that can change LGBTQ+ students' perceptions

of their rural communities—and their place within them. This work can change educators, too; it has the capacity to transform our rural classrooms, transform our teaching philosophies, and transform who we are as educators. Every day rural teachers interact with LGBTQ+ students whether those students are proudly out, currently closeted, or are questioning their identity—and we serve as an "essential source of support for [them]" (Roberts et al., 2023, p. 23). As educators, we must engage in LGBTQ+ advocacy work; these endeavors are essential not only to our queer students' academic success—but to their health, happiness, and overall well-being.

Teachers, remember **LGBTQ**. It is of utmost importance that rural educators **listen** to our queer students and acknowledge their lived experiences; only then can we identify strategies which shift our classrooms and communities "toward support and affirmation" (Rand & Paceley, 2022, p. 23). After listening, we must **give** them support so they can thrive. The support we provide subsequently fosters queer students' rural sense of **belonging**. The desire to belong is universal, but unfortunately, it does not "unfold for all people equally" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 37) since rural communities often possess fixed perspectives about LGBTQ+ people which create "inhospitable circumstances for [queer] students" (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 95). Once our students feel heard, seen, and valued, we can begin **transforming** our rural schools and communities with advocacy efforts, ultimately creating more inclusive, equitable educational spaces which **question** and challenge damaging belief systems and dangerous narratives about gender, sexuality—and rurality.

This work is easier discussed than done, so it's imperative that rural educators assess any risks involved to keep ourselves (and our queer students) safe. Keeping ourselves safe begins with observing the communities in which we work—as well as carefully listening to students, parents, and community members regarding LGBTQ+ issues. Educators must utilize the

strengths and skills of colleagues, administrators, parents, and fellow community members; GLSEN (2024) recommends working with "supportive families, organizers, and local organizations" (p. 2) who will help advocate for queer youth. Unfortunately, current demands on (and criticisms of) educators makes advocacy work seem intimidating and even impossible, but when teachers create networks of support and "work toward change in ways that are [smart and safe], they focus on how to be advocates *and* keep their jobs" (Fleisher, 2019, p. 218).

LGBTQ+ advocacy work is an ongoing process (Blackburn et al., 2018), and the changes teachers make will not revolutionize rural places overnight. In addition, this work is both "complex and emotional" (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 83) since it takes place inside *and* outside of our classrooms. The intersection between rurality and queerness is complicated, but I've realized something: Rural places and queer people are not so dissimilar. Both are often reduced to—and defined by—the damaging stereotypes associated with them. It's time to "disrupt negative assumptions of rural people and places" (Parton, 2022, p. 77). It's time to engage queer students with opportunities which explore their geographies and identities, helping them "envision ways to improve their space" (Boyd & Darragh, 2022, p. 228). It's time to **listen** to LGBTQ+ students, **give** them support, foster their rural sense of **belonging**, **transform** our rural schools and communities, and **question** damaging beliefs about gender and sexuality. Only then will queer adolescents thrive in rural places.

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Appendix A

Current Student Interview Questions

Basic Information

- What are your preferred pronouns?
- How old are you?
- What grade are you in this school year?
- What school do you attend?
- How long have you lived in this community?

Personal Information

- Tell me a bit about yourself (hobbies, interests, aspirations, etc.).
- Tell me about your post-graduation plans.
- If you're comfortable sharing, tell me a bit about your gender identity.
- If you feel comfortable sharing, tell me about your discovery and/or evolution of your gender identity.
- If you feel comfortable sharing, tell me a bit about your family, their level of support, and/or your relationship with them.
- If you feel comfortable, tell me a bit about your friends, the people who you choose to spend your time with, and their level of support and/or your relationship with them.
- Through what programs or social groups do you engage with other members of the LGBTQ+ community (either within this community or outside this community)?
- Is there anything else you'd like me to know before we begin discussing your experiences in this rural community?

Rural Community Information

- Tell me a bit about the community itself. What's it like to live here? If you were to describe this place to an outsider, what would you tell them?
- When you hear the word "rural," what do you think of? What stereotypes do you associate with rurality?
- Do you consider yourself a rural person? Why/why not?
- What kind of things do you do for fun here? What local activities do you enjoy?
- How do the activities you enjoy differ from (or align with) what your peers do for fun?
- Tell me about any amenities or resources the community offers its LGBTQ+ members.
- How would you describe the community's acceptance of its LGBTQ+ members?
- Tell me about your sense of belonging in this community. To what degree do you feel accepted and supported here?
- In what ways has this community helped shape your identity (both positively and negatively)?
- Do you intend to stay here after you graduate? If not, would you ever consider returning to reside? Why/why not?
- Tell me about some benefits of rural living. What does your community do well?
- Tell me about some downsides to rural living. What is something your community could change or work on?
- What else would you like me to know about this community?

Rural School Information

- Tell me about your academic interests. What subjects do you excel in?
- How would you describe yourself as a student or learner?

- Tell me a bit about your school. How would you describe it for an outsider who knows nothing about it?
- What is the student population like? What groups or cliques exist? Where do you feel you exist among or within those groups?
- Tell me a bit about the extracurricular activities available to you. Which extracurriculars are you involved in (if any)?
- If your school has a GSA, are you a member? If so, tell me about your experiences as a member of the GSA (these can be both positive and negative).
- Tell me a bit about your teacher allies. Who (in a position of power) supports you in your school?
- Tell me about how you identify an adult ally. How do you determine which of your teachers, administrators, or counselors is safe to talk to?
- What LGBTQ+ related readings, assignments, or classroom activities have you engaged in, if any? (Ask follow up questions about their experiences/lack of experiences.)
- If you haven't read any LGBTQ+ literature or completed any assignments in which you could see yourself represented, tell me why you think that is.
- Tell me about some ways your school supports its LGBTQ+ students. Is the level of support enough? Why/why not?
- How accepting are your peers of LGBTQ+ students? Tell me a bit about your experiences with your classmates and the student body.
- If you feel comfortable, tell me about any hostility or harassment you've endured while at this school (peers or otherwise). What did teachers and/or administrators do to handle it?

- If you feel comfortable, tell me how this hostility or harassment has affected you academically.
- If you feel comfortable, tell me how this hostility or harassment has affected your mental/emotional health.
- If you feel comfortable, tell me how this hostility or harassment has affected you physically.
- Tell me what you'd like to see teachers, administrators, or counselors do to create safer, more inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ students.
- If you could describe your experience as a rural LGBTQ+ student in three words, what would those words be?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience as a rural LGBTQ+ student?

Former Student Interview Questions

Basic Information

- What are your preferred pronouns?
- How old are you?
- What year did you graduate from high school?
- Which rural high school did you attend?
- How long did you live in this rural community?

Personal Information

- Tell me a bit about yourself (hobbies, interests, aspirations, etc.).
- If you're comfortable sharing, tell me a bit about your gender identity.
- If you're comfortable sharing, tell me about your discovery and/or evolution of your gender identity.
- Are you currently in college? If so, what made you choose this university you currently attend?
- If you're comfortable sharing, tell me a bit about your family, their level of support, and/or your relationship with them. Has that support/relationship evolved as you've gotten older? Explain.
- If you're comfortable sharing, tell me a bit about your friends, the people who you choose to spend your time with, and their level of support and/or your relationship with them.
- Do you keep in contact with anyone from your former high school? Why/why not?

- Through which programs or social groups do you engage with other members of the LGBTQ+ community in your current town/city? What resources are available to you here that perhaps weren't available to you while growing up rural?
- Is there anything else you'd like me to know before we begin discussing your experiences in your former rural community?

Rural Community Information

- Tell me a bit about the community. What was it like to live there? If you were to describe this place to an outsider or new friend, what would you tell them?
- When you hear the word "rural," what do you think of? What stereotypes do you associate with rurality?
- Do you consider yourself a rural person? Why/why not?
- Outside of school, tell me a bit about what kind of things you did for fun while growing up in your rural community. What local activities did you partake in or enjoy?
- How did your chosen activities differ (or align with) what your peers engaged in or did for fun?
- What amenities or resources did the community offer you and its other LGBTQ+ members?
- How would you describe the community's acceptance of its LGBTQ+ members when you were in high school?
- How would you describe your sense of belonging in this community while attending school? To what degree did you feel accepted and supported there?
- Tell me about any ways in which this community helped shape your identity (both positively and negatively).

- Upon graduation, what was your plan? To stay? To leave? Why?
- Would you ever consider returning to this rural community to reside? Why/why not?
- Tell me about some benefits of rural living. What is something your community does/did well?
- Tell me about some downsides to rural living. Viewing your community through a more critical lens, what is something it could change or work on?
- What else would you like to add about your rural community, if anything?

Rural School Information

- Tell me about your academic interests in high school. What subjects did you enjoy or excel in?
- How would you describe yourself as a student or learner while in high school? (And now.)
- Tell me a bit about your former school. How would you describe it for an outsider or new friend who knows nothing about it?
- What was the student population like? What groups or cliques existed while you attended? Tell me about where you existed among or within those groups.
- Tell me a bit about the extracurricular activities that were available to you. Which were you involved in (if any)?
- If your school had a GSA, were you a member? If so, tell me about your experiences as a member of the GSA (both positive and negative).
- If your school didn't have a GSA, how might that resource have benefitted you as a teenager?

- Tell me a bit about any teacher allies you had while you attended high school. Who (in a position of power) supported you in your school? What did that support look like?
- Tell me how you identified an adult ally while you were in school. How did you determine which of your teachers, administrators, or counselors was safe to talk to?
- Tell me about any LGBTQ+ related readings, assignments, or classroom activities you engaged in. (Ask follow up questions about their experiences/lack of experiences.)
- If you didn't read any LGBTQ+ literature or complete any assignments in which you could see yourself represented, tell me why you think that is.
- Tell me about any ways your school supported its LGBTQ+ students. Was the level of support enough? Explain.
- Tell me what else your teachers and administrators could have done to foster a more inclusive environment for you and other LGBTQ+ students.
- How accepting were your former peers of LGBTQ+ students? Tell me a bit about your experiences with former classmates and/or the student body.
- If you feel comfortable, tell me about any hostility or harassment you endured while at this rural school (peers or otherwise). What did teachers and/or administrators do to handle it?
- If you feel comfortable sharing, tell me about some ways in which this hostility or harassment affected you academically.
- If you feel comfortable sharing, tell me about some ways in which this hostility or harassment affected your mental/emotional health.
- If you feel comfortable sharing, tell me about some ways in which this hostility or harassment affected your physical health.

- If you could describe your experience as a former rural LGBTQ+ student in three words, what would those words be?
- *For those no longer living in the community:* Now that you have some distance from your rural community, what advice would you give to current LGBTQ+ students living there (or anywhere rural)?
- Tell me what you would like to see teachers, administrators, and counselors do to create safer, more inclusive environments for their LGBTQ+ students.
- Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience as a former rural LGBTQ+ student?